True Nobility

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True Nobility

by EmilyElm

Summary

Hannibal meets the playboy Prince Will at Cannes and does his best to protect him from the glare of fame and his own sadistic, self-destructive behaviors. But their "special relationship" will be challenged when Will is forced to grow up, avenge his father's mysterious death and accept that he will be King.

Notes

So many gorgeous photos of Mads in Cannes should be blamed for this.

From Cannes to Copenhagen

He’d made a short stop in Antibes and noticed how crowded the streets were. His usual penthouse at his favorite 5-star hotel was occupied, but instead of pouting and making an international incident out of it, he went to the bar.

Before he’d finished his whiskey, he had two starlets draped on his arm and a leggy supermodel dragging him to the dance floor. They convinced him to go to Cannes for the film festival.

Of course, with his name and the company he was keeping, he found himself on the red carpet, dragged into a photo call. This apparently became an international incident. His arrival. The festival essentially stopped to note his presence and he wasn't even invited. But wherever he goes, that's to be expected. The world stops. And gathers round him. Camera flashes popped. The sun could not rival the amount of heat that came off of a 1000 photographers suddenly taking a picture of him against the backdrop of the French Riviera.

“Prince Will,” they shouted. “Over here.” “Give her a kiss.” “Get those women out of the shot.” “Will.” “Will.” “Does your father know you’re here?”

Will grits his teeth. He is almost forty years old. He is way too old to party the way he does. And he’s certainly too old to need his father’s permission to go to some film fuckfest.

“Why did you come to Cannes?” Freddie Lounds, the tabloid maven, shouts over the din.

Will wants to say certainly not for the film, but manages to squirm on his filter at the last second. He flashes her his rare bad boy smile. Let her read into that however she wants. He head-nods to the publicist to end the press conference and to find his ménage. Freddie is so helpful in reminding him what his purpose in life is.

As he’s being led away, he crosses a group whose photo presser he’d interrupted. He recognizes its star, a tall European man with silver hair and sharp cheekbones. Will can’t remember his name though, disoriented by the fog of the whiskey and his mental alarm registering that his father will see these photos and all hell will break loose. Maybe he didn’t think this through.

The movie star approaches.

“Your Highness,” he calls, tentatively.

He indicates Will’s jeans. Will looks down, dreading that his fly was open, but it’s actually worse. His pocketknife has wiggled halfway out and the long-sleeve of his shirt is high enough to reveal the bruises and cuff of rope blotting around his wrist.

No one else would notice what that means, except another fellow kinkster. Or a friend. Those are hard to come by these days.

“Thank you,” Will sighs, struggling to remember the man’s name. He buttons his sleeve and tucks his knife away. Freddie, ever vigilant, notices their exchange.

“Should we be worried that some starlet will be found filleted and pickled in the sea, Prince Will?” the tabloid brat screams over the crowd noise.

A dark cloud passes over Will’s features. She has always ignored the royal hammer that comes down on reporters who even whisper about the women who go missing around the troubled prince. And for her to say out loud, what everyone is thinking, is uncalled for.

The star slides his arm over Will’s shoulder before he can react. Before Will’s own handlers can rush to the rescue.

“Why are you touching me?” Will spits out. He remembers that at some point this movie star was knighted. So therefore the star knows protocol with royalty and the number one rule is that touch is not initiated by the masses. No matter how great his movies are.

“A real friend would not allow you to do what you’re about to do,” the star responds just as swiftly as he had in grounding him.

Will catches a glimpse of himself. His hand had slipped into his pocket and grabbed his knife. It would have been the gotcha of a lifetime – for Freddie to goad the prince into revealing his true nature in front of the world.

He meets the man’s understanding gaze, but immediately rejects his pity. Will is not alone. He is not without a friend. He is not the animal Freddie Lounds and her ilk claim him to be. Defiant, he turns away and runs into the publicist, who is rushing in the film festival’s ambassador of ceremonies to grab a photo op before Will escapes to the parties and clubs that make the festival truly a week to remember.

Will stands with the ambassador, who hands him the obligatory full access pass to the premieres and afterparties and the afterparties of the afterparties, and now obligated, Will smiles and shakes the ambassador’s hand for a well-rehearsed picture. Everyone is happy with the photo op and Will rushes past the filmmakers whose talent should be the main focus. Not Will, who has done nothing with his life except exist. And according to Freddie Lounds, that’s not enough anymore. Even his father has been leaning more towards her thinking lately.

“Thank you for joining us this year,” the ambassador whispers in his ear as Will finally reaches his retinue. His handlers are making sure the girls sign Non-Disclosure Agreements and handing over their cellphones in preparation for another wild and crazy night in the history of wild and crazy nights with the infamous Prince of Denmark.

The emptiness he feels to all that lies ahead prevents him from glancing back at the man who just saved him from himself. He is just relieved he has found this excuse to remain in one

place for a week with something interesting to do. Where he'll be on his best behavior, up until the point when he isn't.

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With the festival ending in a few days, Will drifts off the yacht some rich, royal asskisser had invited him to stay on and slips anonymously amongst the film weary crowds. He is in shorts and sunglasses. His t-shirt has holes in it. He blends in, in his own way, as the rich are not wont to look at people dressed like him. Besides, he is on the hunt for something entirely different than another screening tonight. He has the taste for the exotic, for the tattooed and the pierced, and he hopes to cross paths with someone who won't be missed for a few days.

It's dangerous to do this here. With so many cameras around. But he's out now and the sun is going down, and although he has been surrounded by too many beautiful things all his life, he can feel the magnificence all around him in the shadows of the dying light.

And then his phone rings. It's his father. How does one ignore the call from the King of Denmark? No doubt he's heard of Victoria's Secret catalogue of models he's been seen with. Or the fight with Orlando Bloom. But everyone gets into a fight with Orlando Bloom.

Will opts to silence the call. He'll be yelled at later, when he's sober enough to agree to an apology tour and drying out while building wells in the jungle. Right now, he's going to enjoy the hunt. He can smell someone smoking hash along the promenade. Her hair is shaved on one side and hangs over her face in the other. He likes how toned her arms are. He likes a woman who can put up a fight.

He reaches her side. She's alone. And high. He asks to take a hit. And with a smile, she turns to him. He can tell she doesn't know who he is. He's familiar to her, especially since he's been in the society pages lately – thanks, Freddie, for that – but she can't place his face.

It should make for an interesting evening.

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The propellers crash and churn into the concrete and rock flies everywhere as the helicopter turns in on itself. And then the bodies are ripped apart. He can feel it when the blade cuts into his father's chest and it is startling enough that he awakens in a full sweat.

Will sits up and considers his dream. He's always wanted to kill his father. Who hasn't thought of killing their parents? But not like that. Not the overkill of a machine's handiwork.

And he knows then. He just knows that his father is dead.

Will reaches for his phone. Even when severely fucked up, he doesn't forget his security training to always keep his phone within reach. He finds it on a nightstand. Google notifications have been pinging for mentions of him all week. But the latest alerts are different.

His heart stops. Every article is questioning whether he will be fit to be king.

His dream was true. His father and brother are dead.

With his phone on, his handlers will be pinged with the GPS coordinates to find him. He doesn't bother sending a text when he doesn't even know where he is. The room looks like a typical impersonal hotel suite. Although he wouldn't have expected his hash smoking partner-in-crime to be able to afford a place like this.

He sinks back into the tatted thighs that envelope him and forces himself to think. Luckily, she had been into being scratched up with his knife. She is still bound and he wonders vaguely if he should clean up things before everyone arrives, but he doesn't care what anyone thinks at this point.

Besides, they have seen worse.

He has never felt so alone in his life. Everything that is being written about him is spot on. Namely, that Will does not have the disposition for such responsibility.

Reckless, he awakens the body in his bed. She winces, the cuts stinging and needing some medical attention, but opts to continue sleeping through the pain. Will searches his hungover-addled brain for her name. Margot, he thinks.

"Margot," he shakes her, "a small army will be invading us in short order. Don't say you haven't been warned."

She grunts, uncaring. Fine. He did the courteous thing. Now he pushes her off the bed. Blood trails down the white sheets. This will be one helluva cleanup.

"Go!" he yells at her. She got what she wanted. She can go home and tell the glitterati and the other trust fund babies that she bumped uglies with the elite of the elite – movie stars and royalty.

"This is my fucking hotel room, asshole," she glares at him. And then he realizes – she really doesn't know who he is. She thinks he's nobody too instead of the third in line to the throne of Denmark. The spare. Forever regulated to attend charity events and state ceremonies. She's strong enough to physically throw him out when the doors fling open. His retinue has located him and they surround her to take care of the first problem.

Will longs for the earlier days when he was on the yacht and naked girls would swim out if he so much as waved at them.

The royal wave. He has that important function down.

Little else, however, in the royal skill set. He reaches past the mountain of blow on the coffee table for his shorts and t-shirt. His gut turns at what they'll say about him as his first appearance as King.

His handlers are discreetly holding back as he twists himself and the shorts into a fit.

"I need a suit," Will orders to no one.

About 20 people will now run out at 6am to the empty streets and attempt the impossible. Good. Let them feel what he's feeling.

He climbs into the shower. The water is different in France. Metallic. Ancient. It tastes of the land and the blood that has been spilt over the centuries of warfare. Unlike in Denmark, where it merely tastes of sudden responsibility and encroaching catastrophe.

"Where is my suit?" Will yells, when he emerges from the shower 20 minutes later.

He has sobered up. Gargled with mouthwash. Finger combed his hair back from his forehead. The shadows under his eyes, the sick pallor, will be attributed to his grief instead of partying while his family perished in a helicopter crash. He wraps his nude body in a hotel robe, covered in lipstick and come stains. Apparently, he had showered with Margot at some point during the night.

They will blame the paparazzi initially, in a rush to judgment. But Frederick, his older brother, loved to fly and show off and drift too close to power lines. Will blames Frederick for everything, even for the things before he was even born. And he blames him for the mess he finds himself in now.

With his mask fixed in place, Will faces his retinue. They are ready to take him to Copenhagen. They will televise the coronation from there. He takes an unsteady breath at the thought.

He does not recognize all the new, blinking faces in his entourage and the number of people have doubled. This is really serious. This is really happening. His life will completely belong to the public now.

The lowly assistants want to offer him coffee and show him drafts of official statements. He reminds them he only made one request. A suit.

"A few more minutes, Your Majesty," someone says to placate him.

Will goes to the window and takes one last look at the coast. The festival activities are kicking into gear. Film critics and cinephiles are rushing off to an early screening. A dashing leading man staggers down the street, unnoticed, completing his walk of shame. He travels undetected because the international press has parked out in front of the hotel, determined to capture Will's first appearance.

The door to the suite opens and Will is too lost in thought to turn.

His attendants sweep in, bearing a three-piece suit at this hour. Dark blue on pewter blue pinstripe. With a blood-flower tie. Impeccable. Tailored. Fit for a king.

But the suit is not on a hanger, but still on its owner apparently.

Someone mutters an apology. The suit apparently was worn out to breakfast by this man and he was not tempted to part with it on word alone. This is Cannes, after all. Everyone wants to meet someone and take away a story to tell.

And so Will braces himself to bear the indignity of meeting this civilian. What he wouldn't do to exchange places -- to be a decoy to this man's life. And this stranger would probably do a better job being king for the day.

"Sir Hannibal Lecter," one of his attendants introduces.

"King Will," Hannibal greets and bows his head.

Will winces. This is not something he will get used to hearing.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Hannibal continues. "Your father has always invited my family to his court and it is an honor for me to help you in such a difficult time."

"I will not forget this, Sir Hannibal," Will mumbles.

"Please, no reason for formalities. Call me Hannibal," says Hannibal.

He barely meets Hannibal's eyes. Hannibal drinks him in. But in the short glimpse he stole, Will vaguely remembers that the Lecter family had attended Frederick's wedding to Beverly. And then it comes to him. He was the movie star who saved him on the red carpet.

Will wants to get this over with. He can't wait for the suit any longer. He has to have it now. He reaches for Hannibal to undress, but Hannibal is unmoving. And without any regard to boundaries, Will's hands busy themselves unbuttoning Hannibal's waistcoat. It isn't until he slides the jacket off Hannibal's shoulders that he feels how tense Hannibal is.

Their eyes meet. Hannibal is favoring that pitying look again. The classic Will-is-unwell look. Will smiles back. He is unwell.

"Can you tell me what happened to the king and his heir?" Will asks him while he continues to undress him.

"The official story is the crash can be blamed on mechanical failure," Hannibal ventures to speak, swallowing his discomfort as Will unties his tie and unbuttons his shirt.

"And the unofficial story?" Will takes him in, curious.

"He was murdered."

"Pilot error or sabotage?" Will presses.

Will holds his look with Hannibal. He is grateful that there is no judgment in Hannibal's eyes now. But there's a spark there, something has been lit, especially when he pauses at his belt. Hannibal allows Will to unbuckle it. Who is he to protest?

"Sabotage."

Interesting.

Will wasn't expecting Hannibal to say this, searching his memory for the list of his father's enemies who are capable of such a thing. His father did not act as a typical ceremonial figurehead in the international political arena. Despite Denmark's size, he weighed in on controversial issues and stood as a natural leader on the debate of human rights and immigration in the region. Like Will, his father didn't have many friends. Will exchanges another look with Hannibal and silently asks him to continue.

"The pilot, your brother, would have crashed the plane on his side to spare his father. Frederick landed so that the passenger side took maximum impact. The two got along?"

"Deeply." Frederick's love for his father was well documented. Will's, on the other hand… He hopes in his blackout state that Margot can vouch for his whereabouts.

"There was no distress call. Nothing is adding up."

"In time," Will promises. "And if there is a killer out there, I'll find him."

"Good. Your father was a decent man. He deserves justice."

Hannibal stands in his underwear, debating if that gets handed over too, when Will flings the discarded robe on the bed and puts on Hannibal's pants. He does it one leg at a time, like anyone, but the cloth hugs his frame, outlining the muscles in his thighs and the shirt flat against his tight stomach and waist. When Will reaches for the waistcoat, Hannibal steps closer to return the favor and Will allows him to dress him, buttoning up the vest, sliding on the jacket, holding out the tie. Will is much calmer for the assistance, although his retinue is not pleased.

"The suit is tight on you," Hannibal observes, "but you wear it well."

Will's eyes crinkle, but the smile doesn't reach his eyes. "I have nothing to give you in exchange."

"I never expected anything to be given," Hannibal intones.

"Everyone expects something."

"Trust issues come naturally to you," Hannibal teases.

"As breathing," Will retorts. "And so we meet at our dysfunctions."

Hannibal nods, and Will manages to find a half-smile at this. He recognizes how absurd this is and the two men share a smirk. The world, for a moment, halts, it seems, for them.

They are interrupted by the sounds of Margot, not leaving her suite without a fuss. Hannibal's eyes flicker over her nudity and the obvious marks made by Will. He feels a tinge of jealousy. The handiwork is expert. Hannibal wishes Will would practice on a more deserving subject. From the wails and threats coming from her direction, unfortunately, it will take more than money to quiet her. He steals another glance at Will, who looks over his shoulder, admiring his work too.

While Will is distracted, Hannibal looks Will over. Hannibal played a doctor in his latest movie. From his hundreds of hours of research interviewing physicians and following them on their rounds, he knows a drug addict when he sees one, but Will has still managed to maintain his body despite abusing it. Will does not have an ounce of body fat on him. He is lean and defined in all the right places.

Hannibal's heard about Will's playboy lifestyle, the jet-setting antics of this royal, the worry he put his family through and he is not surprised that the man has no boundaries whatsoever.

"Will you tie my tie for me?" Will asks, so softly. Hannibal takes a moment to sit with that. If Will hasn't been forced to grow up, he will have no choice to do so but now. And so he clings to his childish behavior, which is on its deathbed.

Hannibal sees that Will's hands are trembling. Tears threaten to spill from his eyes. Everything must be hitting him at once.

Hannibal steps into his space and loops the silk strands into a double Windsor. Now the look is complete. Will is dressed, ready for the world, but still he stands frozen at Hannibal's side. And that's when Hannibal breaches protocol once more and is compelled to take Will in his arms.

Will sinks into the embrace, the most unexpected kindness shown to him this whole horrible morning. Hannibal stands in his underwear, the king's body pressed against his, a sigh on his lips.

Their time together is getting more and more intimate, and Will's staff is not pleased. Raised eyebrows pass among them and their impatience is growing.

Hannibal strokes back Will's bangs, as he can feel the anxiety from the retinue pacing around them. He must get on with it. Face the reporters and then fly from Cannes to Copenhagen.

"They're waiting for you," Hannibal nudges him. He doesn't know if Will is aware that the press is treating this like Princess Diana's car crash with wall-to-wall cable coverage, the repeated loop of the crash, the Danes holding vigil outside the empty palace.

Already political dignitaries and world leaders have called into the cable news channels waxing philosophical about Prince Frederick's influence with the King and how inseparable the two were. Will has big shoes to fill and a collective breath is being held to see his next move.

"Let's go downstairs," Hannibal presses. "Let's not keep them waiting."

“What will I say?”

“What do you want to say?”

Will catches the question within the question. Normally, he wouldn’t be amused by this, but the truth is, no one has consulted him on a statement. No one trusts that he’s capable of forming a coherent sentence without the word “party” or “cocaine” attached.

“I’m not good in a crowd,” Will mumbles against his shoulder.

“It’s time to go home, Will,” Hannibal encourages.

“Come with me,” Will blurts out.

Will glances around him at all the suspicious eyes. He knows he's being paranoid, it's probably the cocaine talking, but he needs someone to protect him from these lackeys and from his own demons. He needs an anchor.

The funny thing about fame is how isolating it is, despite everyone knowing your face and being surrounded by people all the time. Hannibal understands this. Understands how scared Will is in this moment. At Cannes alone, he has been trotted out to sell his movie, to do the song and dance for the studio, and to honor his various commercial contracts. Technically, he has fulfilled his obligations. The festival isn’t quite over yet, there’s still the closing ceremony, but he could always fly back for that. And frankly, he has no one waiting for him in his grand, but empty, home in Hollywood.

He’s worried about appearances. If Hannibal were to stand at Will’s side now, when all eyes were on him, his various business interests would be ecstatic. And later, when Will’s grief clears, he will realize Hannibal would have benefitted in his moment of grief and vulnerability.

For some reason, it matters to Hannibal a lot that Will knows that Hannibal is doing this from his heart. He doesn’t want his continued presence to raise any question about his intentions… whatever those are. But they won’t be perceived as self-rewarding.

“I’ll go downstairs with you, but I’ll remain in the lobby, alright?’ Hannibal asks. Will nods, relieved. “And speak from your heart. Speak to your people, who need a leader at this time.”

Will soaks that in. Hannibal smoothes the lapels on his suit that now clings to Will like a second skin. Someone hands Hannibal Will’s tourist clothes that reek of sex and red hash. He forces himself to put them on so he can strut out at Will’s side.

He hangs back in the lobby and glances nervously as Will approaches the bank of microphones outside.

Hannibal catches the press conference on the hotel bar monitors. Every channel is carrying the story and everyone in the hotel bar is watching. Will speaks with a confidence, an empathy that is naturally soothing. The camera loves him, and his usual bloodshot eyes and tear-stained cheeks remake his image for this particular story. Will wraps up his speech, "I

love my family. My father called me before the crash and told me to remember that I was born to serve the Danish people. I will continue his tireless efforts to make Denmark a jewel in the region and beacon of sanctuary for those who are suffering throughout the world." The reporters' faces, those Hannibal can see clearly, relax and grow impressed as Will continues speaking. One news anchor is moved to tears.

Will turns from the cameras and heads back inside to his security detail that will take him to the airport. This is where Hannibal suspects Will will discard him. He's no longer of any use to the royal. He's done the hard part and the rest will be ceremony.

But instead, Will searches for him over the heads of his staff and seeks out this one comfort. He figures it's safer than going on a bender, only to arrive in Copenhagen bleary-eyed drunk and unable to greet his grieving people. He crosses the lobby, leaving the others to follow behind.

"They loved you," Hannibal tells him.

"I know," Will murmurs. "Let's go."

And when Will looks up at him with those eyes and gives him the most breathtaking grin, Hannibal can't resist whatever connection they've made. He falls into step with Will and they snake through the hotel kitchen to sneak out the employee's exit.

Hannibal climbs into the town car, sliding in next to Will, confident he'll sort his life out at a later point. Right now, it's good to have a friend.

The Proposition

Chapter Summary

After a brief morning together, Will considers how well Hannibal will fit into his life.

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the posting delay. I'm hoping to post every other day for the remainder of the week to get the full story out. It's looking to hit about 7 chapters, which is the longest chapter run I've ever hit. Fingers crossed I can actually manage this feat. We shall see...

The Town Car containing Will and Hannibal whips through the Croisette, with police escorts leading the way. All along the famed road, the masses have come out to pay their respects. Despite his unpopular humanitarian stances when he was alive, Will's father, King Einar, had, in death, gained the respect of the world.

"We should stop, Will," Hannibal encourages. He has lived in the States for most of his life, but he knows a good royal stop when he sees one. Since he left the London stage in his 20's, he's mainly lived in Los Angeles and New York. At 25, he'd walked off stage, which in his business was equivalent to career suicide, sick of being a director's whipping boy, teased incessantly for sleeping with his male co-star. His agent blamed his thin-skinnedness for ending his burgeoning career, but in truth, he'd been afraid he would kill the director. And his co-star, for refusing to come out and make a life with him. But one door closed, and another opened. That same agent called to say Hannibal had been offered a film role. And as they say, that was that.

The driver opens the door for Will in the middle of the Croisette. Cameras flash, that's a given, but when Will emerges, he does not expect applause and tears.

The love he feels from the crowd stops him in his tracks. He has never been on the receiving end of such attention. He has never deserved a willing crowd, let alone the applause of thousands of people stretching along a coastline. His body tingles as he soaks in their reverence. He could get used to this feeling.

He walks the Croisette's one and half miles, his security detail within arm's reach, to hear how the world is mourning his family. He kisses babies and hugs mothers who grew up dreaming of becoming Einar and Frederick's princesses, accepts flowers, which he passes to his shocked but nimble staff. He orders that the flowers, which are enough to fill five cars in

the entourage, are distributed to the area hospitals and halfway houses. It is something his father would do and it warms him to know that he has learned something in his 39 years avoiding his responsibilities.

Will squeezes in next to Hannibal when he finally returns to the car. A sudden squall has blown in from Tunisia, bringing harsh desert winds and the threat of thunder and rain. But he was glad for the walk. In a way, it was a form of meditation and had calmed him to comfort someone else's grief rather than his own.

He gives Hannibal a grateful look and squeezes his hand. He takes in his handsomely boyish, blushing friend. Someone, maybe his father, has looked down on him this morning and granted him this one gift.

Three members of his staff rush into the back of the Town Car before it takes off for the airport, sitting across from the two men. They eye each other warily.

"We'll be delayed again when we reach the airport," Alana Bloom informs them, glancing at Hannibal's smelly, hole-y clothes. "He needs a suit if he's to come with us."

"I'm coming," Hannibal announces firmly. Will has not let go of his hand. From the twitch under her eye, Alana does not approve of this. Hannibal holds her look, begging her to see that Will needs him. Will has a reputation for being unpredictable, unstable. The walk along the Croisette was spontaneous and luckily ended well. But he could only imagine if it had gone badly, what would be said about them both. If Hannibal is his clutch at stability – or instability -- then so be it.

Protective, Alana seeks some indication from Will, but he glares at her beneath the fringe of his eyelashes. She's never gotten the sense from him that he's particularly fond of women. And the things the rest of the "Body Men" who have had to pick up after his flings have whispered as much. She doesn't flinch under his glare. She merely accepts that Hannibal will fall into the special relationship category as "personal aide". And therefore will need to be vetted.

"Is there anything we should know about you, Hannibal," Alana sighs, "that would cause His Highness any embarrassment?"

Her aide hands her a tablet, which opens to a file that was hastily put together while Will was out on the Croisette.

"In my next film, I play a Prince," Hannibal admits with some mild embarrassment. It forces a chuckle out of Will.

"You are dating that film's director, Tobias Budge," Alana reveals.

Oh, yes. Hannibal had forgotten about that. Shit. No one was supposed to know about his homosexual relationships. Alana must be good at her job to have been able to dig up that tidbit. His Hollywood team of agents and managers and publicists sees to it he is usually connected to some starlet every year before awards season. Hannibal considers it his way of

giving back, ensuring someone else's career boost over his own. Although now there's no denying it served his own career to fall in line and remain in the closet year after year.

His face blazes in shame. He should have come out a long time ago. Fuck his career bullshit. Living two lives has typically killed any chance he'd ever had at a healthy relationship. And it may explain why he hasn't thought of Tobias once today. He should have called the film production offices at least. They had allowed him to honor his publicity obligations and were holding off filming his scenes until he'd lost his Riviera tan and the party bloat from the festival. At most, he had two weeks to return to Toronto at his fighting weight and pale as a Canadian winter.

Alana shoots Will a look. Of all the men he had to pick in Cannes to escort him to his coronation, he picks a closeted movie star who is playing a prince in his next blockbuster hit. She senses it's going to be a long week. Rubbing her temples, she dismisses Hannibal with a look.

"Your Highness" Alana addresses Will instead. The full weight of what she's about to say falls from three sets of women's gazes. Will braces himself, pressing closer to Hannibal.

"We had this same talk with your brother, five years ago," she prefaces, as if this would relax him. "You will become sovereign of a great nation. You are expected to seek a wife and produce an heir. With the enemies King Einar has crafted in the region and without a clear line of succession, Denmark will be perceived as a weak state that can be attacked. If you don't meet your obligations, we will see a crisis and a threat for rule of the kingdom. The future of Denmark rests with you."

Alana takes a breath and lets what she said land on Will's shoulders. He soaks in this horrible burden and knows it's an impossible position he's found himself in. He's never met anyone who is princess material, let alone anyone who should be his firstborn's mother. And why would he want to give this life to his child?

He lets his misery weigh on him, staring out the window at the deluge bursting from the dark clouds. He notices the airfield as they approach another ancient French road. History, he muses, has never been kind to princes, let alone the modern ones.

Will is lost in thought as the Town Car and the line of decoys and police escorts pull into a tarmac and Hannibal is whisked away from him to get dressed. Will remains in the car alone, fighting the urge to run and stay in France and drive a bus or work as a waiter in Paris. He'd make a fine bus driver. He would never make enough to pay for a lifestyle that included a wife and a child and that would be just fine by him.

He wonders how Frederick had felt after being given his marching orders to marry and procreate. Frederick had probably nose-dived to his private quarters, thumbed through his rolodex and picked the first woman who didn't make him feel like the bumbling idiot he is.

Speaking of Princess Beverly. That had been a long courtship, but she had loved Frederick, warts and all. Their engagement had gone on for years. They'd only married a year ago. And she was a commoner who had crossed paths with Frederick at flight school. They two loved to fly together, but Beverly hadn't wanted the limelight. It took Frederick a long time to

convince her to say yes. And Beverly had been Frederick greatest advisor. Frederick had been lucky to have found her.

When Frederick and Beverly had gotten married, Freddie Lounds had asked Will if he had found someone to take to the wedding and if this person would be his future wife. He had been glib, mentioning he'd only want the best person to share his life with, and wouldn't expose his guest to his world. But now he doesn't have much of a choice. He wishes, for a moment, to have switched places with Frederick. Frederick could remain with Beverly and Will could rest alongside his father, peacefully, for once.

A knock on the door interrupts his thoughts. He presses the down button for his window and Alana peers in.

"For your approval, Your Highness," Alana says gravely.

She steps aside. Hannibal has been fitted in a simple but elegant suit. Will hates this elitist thought, but Hannibal looks like he is the result of good breeding: pulled together, classy, the epitome of style. His hair hangs over one eye, giving him a rakish look, but Will finds him to be serene, lovely to behold.

Will gives an approving nod, which Hannibal catches with a smile. Will joins him on the tarmac and they assess each other.

"Am I a proper traveling companion now?" Hannibal teases.

"Depends on if you're up for being my prince," Will retorts.

The rain whips around them, the wind blowing the heavy drops sideways. He can see Hannibal's eye narrow from his words.

"I'm exhausted, Hannibal, forgive me for being so forward," Will attempts to backpeddle. "You look handsome. When they cast you in that film, it's clear the role of prince is meant for you."

Hannibal swallows, unsure where this is going. "C'mon, friend," he smiles as he takes Will by the arm. "Alana told me you're not allowed to fly private. We have a plane to catch."

They ignore the bodyguards holding out umbrellas for them and make a dash for the plane. KLM Royal Dutch Airlines had delayed the last commercial flight to Copenhagen, but by now, everyone is growing impatient with him. Alana is up ahead, indicating that they board outside the gate, at the back of the plane, but the passengers had tipped off the paparazzi. It will be a media circus as they walk the short distance to the plane from the tarmac.

Will drags his feet, daunted by all the eyes on him as they board the commercial flight. He bends with the wind, crouching close to Hannibal. He can see that there are people at the airport windows, waving. Hannibal indicates he should stop and acknowledge the crowd. Again, Will takes Hannibal's cues, but asks him to stay at his side.

Will ducks into the plane and sees his entourage has taken all the back rows. Heads have turned to watch as he boards, and warily, he gives a curt nod and wave to the passengers. They are even more enthused to see Hannibal, and together, they work both sides of the aisle, saying a word to the awestruck group. Prayers are given, tears are shed. These are Danish people. Who loved the dead king and prince. Will shares that he did too. He realizes he's fading fast and wants to get home and be done with today. Getting behind who did this is his priority. He glances over and takes in how at ease Hannibal is at this. His instincts, his manner are a natural fit for the royal lifestyle.

The pilot has emerged from the cockpit and walks down the aisle to greet his esteemed passengers, and Will approaches him warmly. To the crowd's "aww's" of approval, he throws an arm over the pilot's shoulder and thanks him and the passengers for holding the plane for him.

With that business over, Will indicates that he wants to sit in the back, next to Hannibal. He takes the window seat and lets Hannibal and one of his bodyguards shield him from the public scrutiny.

He pretends to be asleep as the pilot announces his preparations for takeoff. Hannibal had been right – his people need a leader, someone to comfort them. The cycle of life, ceremony and ritual would indicate that Will's tenure would be a peaceful one. He has to give the semblance of stability for the sake of his people.

Burying two royals will be devastating to the Danes and push the Parliament to seek even more power. To his dismay, he has to admit that Alana is right. The sooner he gets married, the better.

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Copenhagen has come to a standstill. Traffic has disappeared from the streets. A collective breath seems to be held as Will's plane lands at Kastrup. Families and curiosity seekers have lined the boulevard. Frederick's helicopter would have crashed not too far from the airfields and the bodies are awaiting state in a nearby command center.

Will and Hannibal deplane from the back exit and leave Alana out of the car that takes them to command.

"We should talk, Hannibal," Will mumbles in a low voice, in the solitude of the car. "Like adults for a moment before…" Will waves absently at the world awaiting him outside. "… before the madness hits."

Hannibal nods, solemn. He can't imagine what Will is about to go through. Viewing his father and brother's charred, mangled bodies from the crash. The press. The dynastic demands of his office when he needs to mourn.

“Not that this qualifies as a proper first date,” Will trails off, avoiding eye contact to overcome Hannibal’s shock. “But I have obligations to fulfill and I would like you to share those engagements with me. At my side. As my consort. I think you understand my predicament…”

Did Will just ask him to marry him?

“I do, but I don’t think I have the right parts, Will,” Hannibal soothes carefully. “You need a wife. A head of state traditionally selects a virginal bride.” He tries not to laugh in the face of Will’s proposition. Did he really just try to propose to him? “I’m older than you. People will say you are replacing your father...”

Hannibal winces. He does not mean to be so blunt, but now is the time for bluntness. This will look bad. The first European king’s gay marriage and what will it get either of them? Hannibal’s career will be finished. Will could not even travel to half the world and be welcomed.

“It would be groundbreaking,” Will declares. “It would be all anyone would talk about for a very long time.”

“I could never act again,” Hannibal sighs, as a reality check to Will’s visionary but unsupported claims.

Will nods -- there would have to be a sacrifice and Hannibal would be the one to make it. Hannibal exchanges a look with him. Will is indeed serious.

“You realize I can’t give you a child,” Hannibal says to just confirm that this is really being discussed.

“Of course,” Will throws up his hands. He is not Frederick, he is not an idiot. “What they didn’t tell you about me is my affairs have been… reckless, at times. Scandalous, even. I may have several children out there already. We’d have to finally deal with those paternity claims.”

“So this is a business arrangement for you to divert attention from your past?” Hannibal presses.

“I know that we just met,” Will struggles to make an honest pitch. “I’ve done a lot of things alone, but I can’t do this. I can’t. I need you, Hannibal. Please, help me. “

Hannibal has never been more afraid in his life. How did he get to this moment where everything he believed in hung in the balance? It was an attractive proposition to become an actual prince that could advance gay rights around the world. But this wasn’t love. They hadn’t even kissed. How could he even consider marrying someone who may not even be gay, who he hasn’t had sex with, who considers this business?

“Will,” Hannibal starts to protest. He is stumped. Everything else in comparison to what Will is offering him seems completely irrelevant. “You deserve to have the person at your side who will love and protect you.”

“Isn’t that what you would do?”

“Do you even like men?”

“It doesn’t matter to me. I’ve been in orgies. With a mixed crowd. I’m sure I’ve tried a few things although I was wasted when –“

“Will,” Hannibal raises his voice, exasperated. “This is serious. Sex and love and marriage matter to me. This will play out on the world stage. This is my life. Yours. Royalty can’t divorce on friendly terms after the Oscar season ends.”

“What?”

Hannibal, flustered, tries to regroup. Will takes Hannibal’s hands. Maybe this was a mistake, like funeral sex and yacht parties at Cannes. Maybe when things settle down he'll have to tell Alana to pay off Hannibal to pretend this conversation never happened. But maybe not. He takes the plunge. “I’ll have Alana send you the paperwork. All I ask is that you think about it.”

Stunned, Hannibal watches as Will steps out of the car and holds out his hand for Hannibal to take. With Hannibal taking Will’s elbow, they walk into the hastily crafted morgue, constructed to hold the bodies of the House of Graham bloodline. Princess Beverly steps aside, barely able to contain her shock as she watches them enter the viewing stage together.

Coronation

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal arrive in Copenhagen at last and fall immediately into palace intrigue.

Beverly steps aside, bowing her head at Will, ignored by him and side-eyed uneasily by Hannibal. She recognizes Hannibal. He’s one of the biggest international stars on the scene right now and yet it still doesn’t explain why he's been invited to view her dead husband’s body.

Hannibal glances between Will and Beverly, sensing her tension. Will’s tendency to be rude in general would definitely require someone to smooth any hurt feelings over – Hannibal catches himself when he realizes that he’s moving in Beverly’s direction.

Her eyes widen at his extended hand before she automatically takes it.

“My condolences, Your Highness,” Hannibal whispers. “Will is...”

“A dick,” Beverly snaps. “Trust me, we’re used to him taking his daddy issues out on us.”

“I was going to say upset,” Hannibal adjusts his disdain.

“Upset? We’ve only been waiting for him to return home for most of the day,” she indicates the bodies that have been sitting out on stainless steel tables, under heavy sheets with the royal insignia. “They’ve only been waiting for him.”

Will has summoned over the morgue attendant, who pulls back the sheets covering the bodies of King Einar and Prince Frederick. A wave of outrage and fear rips through him. He forces himself to look at their remains. He considers how they’ve been changed. His memory of them, forever changed.

Beverly's gaze is fixated on the sheet lifting off the bodies, before she looks away. She wishes she could un-see this last image of them.

“This is my father,” they hear Will say, gasping. “This is all that remains of my father?”

The attendant stands frozen in place as Will’s fury builds around him. He reaches to bring the sheet back, but Will holds his wrist from doing so and dismisses him.

And then his mind collapses on itself. And plunges into pure imagination, until he's climbing and climbing, the sun shimmering in the distance, flying into clear skies.

Frederick, always the favored brother, points to their summerhouse in the distance. It's where their father preferred to be when he wasn't out speaking for the voiceless and the outcasts. They share a familiar smile with each other.

But in the blink of an eye, the helicopter is on the ground and Frederick is backing out of the cockpit. Everyone is going backwards, in time. His father stands with Alana, looking over his itinerary for the day. Briefly, Will stands at the observatory crest, gazing down at them like a ghost not invited to the party. He catches how Beverly steals a quick look from Alana. Whatever they've done, says that look, has been put in motion.

Like that, the image is gone. Will twists his neck, casting a glance over his shoulder to take in Beverly. She is the picture of innocence, relaxed with Hannibal. But a bloody set of wire cutters hangs at her side, dripping black with engine oil and royal blood.

Just at that moment, the tent flaps open and Alana enters, in her flagrant duplicity. He hopes, for Frederick's sake, that as the helicopter went off course that he died still believing Beverly loved him. Maybe, for Frederick, that had been enough, in the end.

Will catches Alana and Beverly exchanging a look. He doesn't blame Alana for choosing sides. His bet would be on Beverly taking the throne too. She's competent, ambitious, self-assured. Hell, she would make a brilliant queen. Except for the fact that it's not hers to claim. He looks away and exchanges a look with Hannibal.

Will reaches out his hand and beckons Hannibal to his side. Hannibal presses forward, politely excusing himself from Beverly. He tries not to overstep his boundaries by looking at the bodies, but keeping his sole focus on Will. They exchange a quizzical look.

"Stay with me," Will demands. "It's not safe here."

Hannibal nods, bowing his head, admonished by the future king. Without meaning to, Hannibal takes in the remains of Einar and Frederick. A strangled yelp escapes him and he finds himself wrapped in Will's arms. He can't pull his eyes away from the sight.

Will has to cradle Hannibal's face in his hands and force him to look into his eyes. Hannibal is shaking. Tears threaten to stream down his face. He takes a shallow breath and tries to control his emotions. It's almost as if he's crying for Will, subbing in for a much needed emotional rescue.

"I'm so sorry, Will," murmurs Hannibal.

Will wraps his arms around him, grateful that someone is in touch with their humanity. As much as the family is about image, and maintaining that image at all costs, Will understood at an early age that his spirit, his soul was crushed in favor of duty. If someone could ache for him, then maybe all was not lost. Hannibal tries to pull himself together, and over his shoulder, Will gazes at Beverly and Alana.

"Don't be," Will strokes the back of Hannibal's head, maintaining a steady gaze with Beverly. "It's not your fault."

Will peers one last time at the forms of father and brother on the stainless steel tables. He indicates for the morgue attendant to cover the bodies and then he turns, guiding Hannibal out. Alana calls out to Will, firm:

“The Queen Mother needs to see you,” she informs him. He barely grunts, but Hannibal is sensitive enough to detect that the worst is not over yet.

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Will watches the city blocks pass by, one by one. His motorcade turns into the octagonal courtyard of the palace compound and slips through the security gate, already teeming with mourners. This time, Hannibal doesn’t press Will to stop. The reality of Einar’s death has Will staring out the tinted window, unseeing.

A heaviness settles over them once they make their way to the private quarters of the Queen Mother. The rococo style interiors are still breathtaking, with the rich murals and intricate crystal chandeliers in every room. But the bouquets of white flowers flowing in from heads of state and various charities are taking over, evidence everywhere that the funeral preparations are underway.

Will gently asks Hannibal to wait while he has a word with his mother. Hannibal is swept into the same sitting room where Prime Minister Lars Rasmussen waits, on edge from the Corgis that have attacked his ankles for the better part of the day.

It slips out before the Prime Minister can stop himself – “Sir Hannibal, what are you doing here?”

Will shoots him a silencing look before he steps into another set of private chambers.

Bedelia, Queen Mother of Denmark, never expected Will to arrive today. If he had even made it in time for the funeral, would have been a victory. Some people are not made for the birthright. She had made that determination about Will at a very early age. But, to his credit, he has arrived and the coronation regalia has been wheeled out on rolling stations topped with beds of silk and velvet. Bedelia has chosen all vintage pieces for his debut. She will receive her son in front of the station she spent the day selecting.

The cameras and microphones have been positioned for the brief announcement that will take place on the main balcony of the Amalienborg Palace. In the modern era, it is just a brief formality with the Prime Minister bearing witness. She silently thanks the heavens that Will will not have any real power to wield. She suspects he will tire of having to make appearances and will fall back to his default of scandal and laziness.

Will typically bows upon entering her chambers. Now she must curtsy to him. It gives them both pause. They exchange a look.

“Mother,” Will responds to the silence.

“You don’t look drunk, Will, or high,” Bedelia observes. “What a pleasant start.”

“I’m trying, Mother,” Will grits out.

“Ready for the circus?”

He exhales. In truth, he is terrified. His eyes dart to the windows. He can hear the crowd stirring. Word has spread that he has arrived and the coronation will have to happen soon, before the sun sets. People have been standing outside all day, waiting for this moment. He can feel the bile rise up in his throat. The sweat beading on his upper lip.

“You can always stand aside. Make way for Beverly, who is proven and beloved by the people.”

“It is time for a woman to rule,” Will agrees. Bedelia smiles in agreement, relieved. “…but it will have to be my future daughter, who will be in line as Denmark’s queen.”

“A daughter?” Bedelia stifles a laugh. “I'm talking about now, Will. Frederick had Beverly involved with meetings at the highest level. She's like a daughter to me.”

“And I am your son and next in line for the throne.”

The finality of this sinks in for them both. Will casts his doubts aside and motions for Bedelia to fit him with his regalia. She slips on a dark blue brocade jacket over his shoulders. He bows his head as she brings a sash across his chest and then pins the royal crest ribbons and medallions over his heart. Next, she fits a 17th century ornate ring of sapphire on his ring finger. “To match your eyes,” she wrinkles her nose as she peers at his hard-to-pin eye color.

“You won’t wear the crown today,” she informs him. “That will be placed on your father’s coffin at his funeral.”

“Understood,” Will winces. He fights back tears. “How can you not talk about what happened to him?”

She faces him, annoyed, soaking in his judgment.

Will blathers on, reduced to the pout of a 7-year-old version of himself. But still, it hurts to feel how clinical this all is to her. “You made me fly coach and face the public when my father died. You are unfeeling and --“

“Will,” Bedelia takes a breath. “I also lost my firstborn child. You have no idea what grief is. Or how our lifestyle looks to the taxpayers who have to fund it. Have you stopped once and considered the image you've cultivated? What you will need to cultivate as King? You have absolutely no regard for what you’re about to undertake.”

Her arms drop down to her side as if his very aura sickens her.

“It should be Frederick out there, not you,” she barks, as vicious as any dog.

They regard each other in complete silence.

Will gathers his forts around him and wishes he'd brought Hannibal in sooner. He finds a rejoinder, after a long pause.

"I shouldn't be too much of a disappointment then," he smiles. "Have you considered mourning in New Zealand?"

She throws her head back and assesses him. "You will last all of a week without me…"

"Alana didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what, Will?"

"I have my own advisor now. You can fire Alana or take her to Fredensborg with you. But I doubt she wouldn't've mentioned my good news."

"You're a danger to everything we have ever built. You reckless, narcissistic, little boy -- "

"I am the House of Graham now, and I will welcome and turn away anyone I see fit into my palace," Will declares. Bedelia's mouth slots into a thin line. He doesn't shy away from looking her straight in the eye.

"I want the paperwork drawn up and sent to his attorneys by the end of the week. He can afford a dowry. Even in this recession, we'll get him to keep a private plane for our disposal. A fair exchange, yes?"

"You only disappoint your father's memory, Will."

She glares at him and then the doors open. Alana indicates the time as the press secretaries for the Crown and the Prime Minister signal that the countdown is beginning for the evening newscasts. The sun is about to set and they only have a small sliver for magic hour. The light will glint perfectly off of Will's regalia.

Bedelia lets the argument go for another time and glares as much to Will. Will crosses into the main rooms that face the public square. Hannibal seems to linger back and Will pulls Alana aside to have a word.

"I want him on the balcony with the rest of the family," he orders curtly.

"But –" His look silences her. He will brook no argument.

Alana looks to Bedelia for support, but the Queen Mother ignores her. Alana personally approaches Hannibal and brings him into the inner circle, introducing him to the royal photographer and other essential staff.

Princess Beverly, changed into a black dress and dramatic veil, has joined the group to take an official photo with the King and Queen Mother. Bedelia barely hides her disdain at the sight of the movie star posing for a separate photo with Will. She turns to Beverly, her eyebrows raised to say, "See? Unworthy for the throne. It should be you front and center on

the balcony." Beverly struggles to maintain all that has been lost in the span of fourteen hours. The party moves the enthronement service to the balcony that faces the courtyard to the main street. The Danes have drifted in below to bear witness.

Hannibal is directed to stand at the far end, behind Beverly, whose veil catches the breeze. Bedelia stands beside Will, in a prim Chanel outfit, with black gloves. And Will faces Lars. The public watches them below, not a word spoken as the solemnity of the occasion settles as if written in their bones. A great silence descends, as a prince is about to be crowned king.

“Your Majesty, Queen Mother Bedelia,” Lars bellows and the echo is picked up in the mics as his words spread across the courtyard to the grand boulevard and park where the overflow crowd watches on giant Jumbotron screens.

“I speak on behalf of the people when I share our deepest condolences to you and Princess Beverly. In a time of growing nationalism and environmental crises, King Einar and Prince Frederick stood firmly on Danish soil as citizens of the world,” Lars pauses as the crowd roars its approval. Danish flags are waved in the air. Lars nervously blinks, finding his place along the clear glass of the teleprompter fitted discreetly behind Will’s right shoulder.

The sun breaks at the horizon and spreads a warm glow along the cobblestones of the courtyard and reflects a burnish gold on Will’s skin. Another pregnant silence fills the city square.

“By order of The People of Denmark, I now proclaim the new King,” Lars begins the proclamation. “Will, who relinquishes all former titles. His title now, by the Grace of God, King of Denmark, Will den Anden, afs Kong Nade Danmarks Dronning. His motto: With God’s help, the love of The People, Denmark’s strength.

Will steps forward to address his people and leans near the balcony’s rail. A cheer rises through Copenhagen for miles, as is tradition. “Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah, long live King Will!" sounds out nine fold.

Will waits for the crowd noise to settle down, relishing in the good cheer, the support, that surrounds him. He looks out to the setting sun, hitting the right note of gravitas for the occasion.

“My beloved father, our King, is dead,” Will begins his first address. “The task my father carried on for nearly forty years is now resting on my shoulders. I pray to God to give me help and strength to carry the heavy heritage. May the trust that was given to my father also be granted to me.”

He nods and raises his arm to wave to the crowd. The rest of the family gathers closer, waving too. Picture perfect. Some people in the crowd are crying. Others wave back, shaking with relief. All is in order. All is right again in Denmark.

With the goodwill of the Danish people on his side, Will considers Bedelia, determined not to botch this up and give her the satisfaction of seeing him fail. And with that, he strides back into the grand hall, resolving to deal with Beverly and Alana, set on avenging his father and brother tonight.

Crown

Chapter Summary

> Will assumes power and Bedelia gives Hannibal a taste for it himself. Hannibal's insecurities and Will's issues may make their hard-fought day all for naught.

The grand hall has filled with relatives, dignitaries and other assorted nobility who have arrived early for the funeral. Something Bedelia no doubt arranged. Will has to admit that the subdued but stated affair is apropos. He greets his distant relatives with a mix of dread and borderline hostility. Darkness has descended in this cold house and this is his time to execute his plan.

But before he focuses on that, he must answer the calls from the heads of state coming in from all over the world. President Obama is first on the line and he excuses himself to the wing of the King's Office. As he follows his newly promoted valet, James Price, he considers that he's left Hannibal alone with the vultures. If Hannibal can survive this evening, he may stick around yet. And faintly, Will realizes he's counting on it.

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Since entering the palace, Hannibal has been on autopilot, which is his fallback when he feels out of his element. He has no idea of what is expected of him. Alana has been introducing him to staff as Will's special friend and he doesn't even want to parse what that means or the way the phrase trips off her tongue.

A server approaches with a flute of champagne and he accepts it, although he's learned over the years at various functions to just keep a glass in front of him and sip from it all night. He must not indulge. He hasn't eaten since breakfast, and Will, in this morose, pensive mood, will expect him to be on his toes. He does not even know what to expect tonight. Are they -- ? Should he make the first move?

He senses a hand on his elbow and looks down. Bedelia smiles up at him.

"We should talk," Bedelia begins.

"Of course."

Hannibal lets the feeling of dread billowing from his gut reach his nerves for a brief instant before he follows after her. They enter her private bedchambers, where the trays of jewelry

and other formalwear from the ceremony are being carted off and flown back to the Throne Room in Christiansborg Palace. She pauses before one of the velvet lined trays and selects a delicate gold and bejeweled crown.

“We’ll use this tomorrow to complete the camp of woe, laying the crown at the foot of Einar’s casket. This is power,” Bedelia announces and she puts the crown in his hands.

Hannibal manages not to drop it. There are diamonds and garnets lining the gold leaves that curve in a closed loop toward a sky blue-enameled egg in its centre.

“Glory,” she intones.

“It’s heavy,” he notes.

“History usually is,” she pronounces, reclaiming the regalia and setting it on its cushion.

“So you’ll be sitting in the front pews with us too? Walking in the funeral procession?”

“Possibly,” off her look; then: “Yes. King Will has not sent me home.”

“You act like you have no choice in the matter. That you are without means to return yourself to Cannes or wherever you came from.”

“I was sitting at a café early this morning on the Croisette, reading the latest script from a movie I’m in, drinking coffee, deviating from my diet…”

“So charming…”

“And Will’s valet, Jimmy, I think – “

“—James – “

“James, yes, sorry. Um, he approached me and complimented me on my suit.”

“Is this the suit?”

“No. Will has it on. I don’t know whose suit this is. Probably something purchased at the Burberry store in the airport.”

“It just gets better and better, doesn’t it?” she gives him a tight smile. She could not look frightfully less amused. Hannibal wants to curl up at her feet and die. “What will you tell the press on how you met? Have you received talking points yet from the Crown Office?”

Hannibal shakes his head no and clamps his mouth shut. He will not be telling the Queen Mother the rest of the story. The cocaine on the coffee table, Margot wailing down the entire length of the hotel hall, the blood on the sheets. She is right to be worried. Come to think of it, he should be more worried than he is. How will he explain this sudden connection to a Prince that led to an invitation to his coronation? Maybe this is his delayed reaction surfacing at last.

Bedelia signals for the staff to take the crown and they watch in silence as they file out. Hannibal lets out the breath he's been holding.

"My absolute sympathy to have burdened you on this tragic day," Hannibal attempts to start over.

Bedelia waves this off. "We're not here to discuss me. It's a relief to see you're not cruising the buffet line. I take it you learned the lesson early that the camera adds ten pounds."

She appraises his body fully, her eyes lingering over his firm torso and trim waist. They stop at the strain on the zipper, where his crotch had stretched out the material when he had started thinking about his sleeping arrangements tonight. He is mortified. This is what he has to endure being in the public eye, when he is up for a role and has to meet the producers and the studio executives ("Is he still fuckable?" "My mother still wants to fuck him.") and wardrobe has to take measurements, and now the scrutiny of a woman probably only slightly older than he is.

But what makes this blatant undressing worse is that it feels like a betrayal to Will. To whatever is growing between them. He's protective of Will's trust. He doesn't want Bedelia to presume he sleeps with anyone. He's heard woman of her generation speaking of actors as only step up from a prostitute.

"You're lean," Bedelia observes. "You have the same body you had when you were 25 years old. I remember that scene from `Boulevard Raspail' when you took off your shirt. Your body mass is impressive, considering a man your age."

"I never know when I have to take off my shirt. So I stay prepared."

"With good reason. You don't regret doing so much nudity now, do you? How it could be held against Will as he tries to build a clean image?"

This stings.

Like anyone, he has body image issues. He has to work hard to maintain his physique. But to know the nude photographs and the sex scenes from his films could hurt Will's image and his standing in the world gives him pause. He's an artist. An actor. His body is his canvass. And it had never betrayed him, until now.

He also picks up on her not-so-subtle dig about his age. The age difference, too, stings. Maybe Will finds him attractive now, but what happens if he actually makes it to 60? Hannibal has dyed his hair for certain roles, depending on the character, but unlike his male counterparts, he has not gotten any work done. For the first time in his life, he considers plastic surgery. A little Botox to rid himself of the crow's feet. His hair has polled well with audiences when it's a honey-wheat blond.

And then there's his stamina…

He snaps out of the self-hate spiral he has literally just face-planted into. He forces himself to smile at Bedelia and hopes she doesn't read it as encouragement to unzip his tight slacks and

do a pole dance for her, only wearing the crown.

They regard each other and both conclude it would probably be more appropriate for him to be dating Bedelia, now that she's widowed. She smiles at him, as if reading his thoughts like a book. She takes one more glance at his crotch area.

"Hopefully, you're young at heart, and will be able to keep up with him, and his… appetites, of which there are many," emphasizes Bedelia. "Will is a heartbreaker, you know. So many women we've had to pay off. He has no idea. This new experiment with you seems rather… sudden to me, if I may be so forward. At least, he found someone who knows how to hold himself with some comportment. True nobility is hard to come by."

Hannibal checks in with his body again, to control his breathing, and realizes his mouth is hanging open. He snaps it closed. So this is where Will gets his churlish behavior.

"What are your plans with my son, Sir Hannibal, since you've already taken advantage in his time of grief?"

"I have merely kept His Majesty company at his request – "

"Ninety percent of one's happiness or misery rides on the person one chooses to marry. It's a huge decision. One that should not be taken lightly – to marry the right person."

Hannibal nods silently, seeing the direction in which this is going.

"My son is impulsive, paranoid, and now he's got a taste for power and prestige. His Grace, if I may be perfectly candid with you, lacks a certain grace. Have you seen the worldwide web stories about him? The Google search alone could take days to get through."

Hannibal shakes his head no.

"Do you know what you've gotten yourself into, Hannibal?"

Clearly, if he did, he would be anywhere but here. Hannibal can barely lift his eyes to meet her piercing gaze. She stands but a breath away from him.

"This is your chance to run. Back wherever you came from." She pivots on her heel and turns her back to him. "The official palace photos have been distributed to the media. The picture of you and Will has been picked up by the wire services. It will be everywhere within the hour. The caption describes you as a close friend. But they will dig and discover you may have crossed paths here or there, but you actually met today. Thirteen hours ago, in fact. Can you imagine what they will say?"

Hannibal's lip twitches. To be honest, he hasn't cared what anyone thinks about them at all. He reminds himself that this is just an act for her, to get a rise out of him. Yes, it's only been thirteen hours since he's properly met Will. Yes, he has to admit that he's flattered that someone actually wants a commitment from him and is not afraid to be seen in public together. Of course, all of this is insane.

Her eyes flash as she meets him in the reflection of a wall mirror. He tells himself that this is only one version of her and he must not let his own insecurities get the best of him. He braces himself for the final blow she must strike to his ego.

“You haven’t run yet, Hannibal. Why is that? Are you in love with him?” Bedelia asks crisply, regaining her composure.

Six seconds tick away in the time it takes for his mind to check in with his heart. And the answer stuns him and etches on his features. She scoffs, looking at him in disbelief.

“The Royal Family, the House of Graham, is a business you think you want to marry into! But it comes with responsibility that will bleed into every area of your life. Take my advice, Sir Hannibal,” Bedelia regards him, “and leave while you still have a chance.”

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Hannibal staggers out into the grand hall, eyes darting for an exit. He is a quivering mess, and try as he might, he cannot school his features. Finally, he fixes a half-smile on his face, for the prying eyes and camera lenses that seem to be following him everywhere. No doubt wondering if he belongs here. Or, if they are in Bedelia’s camp, how long he’ll stay. And if they asked, he wouldn’t know how to answer. Perhaps he should find some talking points. No wonder Will is considered paranoid. And Will is nowhere in sight.

He doesn’t know what he needs, but a drink and some air would be a good start. He can’t believe he left Cannes to be subject to this humiliation.

He drifts into another wing of the palace, suspecting he’s approaching the apartments for Will and Beverly, and finds an alcove in a vacant hallway and curls up on the cushions, exhaling deeply. His head tips back along the textured wall. He wants to cry again.

He can’t breathe considering all the terrible things Bedelia said to him. It has always been his problem, mixing business with pleasure. He has fallen in love with every one of his co-stars in his youth. Lately, he’s taken to his directors. There have been some actors he knows who have gone to bed with half the film crew, but he always prided himself with staying above the line. He’d wanted an equal. Someone who could handle his lifestyle and not feel the way he’s feeling now.

Less than equal.

Like he should run.

And never look back.

He has a house in the Hollywood Hills that has sweeping vistas of downtown L.A. and the ocean. He goes for a six-mile hike every morning in the nearby canyon when only the

coyotes are awake. He has prided himself on being an early riser, and yet look where rising early this morning got him.

If he were to return to any one of his various homes – the condo in New York, the ranch in Santa Barbara – they would be empty. Filled with many rooms, without question. Overflowing with awards and movie memorabilia and vintage cars. Not to mention, he has an entire penthouse hotel suite awaiting him in Toronto decorated with his favorite artwork from home. While he doesn't lack for material possessions, he is clearly missing something vital in his life.

Hannibal weighs whether he could manage to stay away from Copenhagen if he did run. If the power of Will's persuasion could reach him as far as Toronto. If he could deny himself a palace at his disposal, now that he's gotten a taste of this life. Where the rooms are filled with art and history and maybe someday Will's children from all his many affairs.

He exhales again. He doesn't know if he can run. Why hasn't he?

Hannibal's fingers course through his hair, over the contour of his chiseled jaw. A nervous tic. He is going to fall apart any minute, he can feel the emotion building in him. Having a nervous breakdown after chatting with the Queen Mother will be the icing on the cake. He laughs out loud. He is absolutely going mad from indecision.

And then he looks up and Will is there.

"You look like you've talked with my mother," Will quips.

"That bad, huh?" Hannibal tucks his hair behind his ear, nervous.

"I'm sorry I left you alone."

"It was inevitable."

"The talk or…"

"The reality check. I don't belong here, Will. I should go."

Hannibal gulps back his tears and rises, swaying a little too close to Will. Will doesn't move.

"We eat our own here. As you've no doubt experienced."

Hannibal waits. For whatever reason, he can't move either.

Will continues, probably, Hannibal assumes, out of kindness. "It would be most unfortunate if you left. For me, at least. I can't speak for my mother."

Hannibal can't help himself. He laughs.

"Are you alright?" Will reaches out to steady Hannibal. "You're shaking."

“I,” Hannibal takes a breath, “I suffer from anxiety. I know. It’s ridiculous considering the profession I’m in.”

“What did she say to trigger your attack?”

Hannibal can’t bring himself to rat out Bedelia. He can’t bring himself to tell Will he was undressed by his mother’s eyes.

Will fills in the gap. “You can’t imagine how often I’ve wanted to strangle her.”

Hannibal nods, and feels the tears rush to his eyes. This is why Will can get away with anything with anybody. He gives voice to deep feelings that most people would dare not speak of. Hannibal’s voice is choked when he speaks.

“Please don’t do anything on my account,” he forces himself to smile, his eyes glassy. “I can handle myself. I always do.”

“But you're no longer alone. I’ll say something to her tonight.”

“Will. Please don’t.”

“Then what can I get you for your anxiety?”

“I usually take half a Xanax before a premiere or a table read. An interview maybe calls for a whole one. This is without precedent.”

“I’ll have your bags from Cannes sent to an apartment for you in the palace. James has your cell. He’ll bring that too. I will totally understand if you choose to take two pills with a half a glass of rose tonight.”

“Alright, King Doctor.”

A shared laugh now. It is a comfort to see Will at ease. It relaxes Hannibal, too.

“It's been a whirlwind for me,” Hannibal admits. “I can’t imagine how you’re handling any of this.”

Will shrugs. “It’s strange to say, but I have been prepared for this my entire life.”

Hannibal nods. “It was an honor to witness your coronation.”

“It was an honor to have you there,” Will intones.

They are at a standstill. From a distance, Hannibal can hear Bedelia’s voice ring in his head, urging him to leave. But the exit seems to keep moving further and further away from him.

“Would you like to accompany me to a small dinner in my apartment? Nothing fancy. Alana is attending. There’ll be a debriefing, tomorrow’s agenda, the map of the procession.”

Hannibal can’t find the will to resist. He puts the ball in Will’s court.

“Are you sure?” Hannibal asks. Now’s Will's chance to show Hannibal to the door.

Will tilts his head and silently indicates the short distance to the apartments down the hall. Hannibal follows him, relieved.

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Beverly and Alana bow as Will and Hannibal enter.

Hannibal draws closer to Will, now an expert on sensing the impending fight brewing in the room.

Right away, Beverly attacks. They haven’t even made it into the foyer yet. “You failed to mention Frederick in your address. Will, he was your older brother and he needs to be shown some respect –“ Will fires back: "Like the way you've shown him respect?" "What does that mean?"

James reaches Hannibal’s side and guides him out to the hall. Reluctantly, Hannibal leaves Will’s side.

“Your phone, Sir Hannibal,” James smiles.

Hannibal nods his thanks. It’s fully charged and flashing. His voicemail is full. Too many text messages to count. He has not missed his phone all day, which is unusual for him. He remembers handing it over to James when he agreed to go up to Will’s hotel room.

“Your apartment is over here,” James indicates a door down the other hall. “Your bags from your hotel suite were brought along. Please let me know if anything is missing.”

“Housekeepers from the hotels usually steal my clothes and such. I never pack anything I’ll miss.”

Although he hopes his pills are in his toiletry bag.

“James,” Hannibal turns as he makes his way to his apartment. “Will you let King Will know that I’ll just be a few minutes?”

“Of course, Sir Hannibal.”

Hannibal tucks his head down to look at his phone. Jack has called. It must be five, maybe six o’clock in the morning in the States. He dials anyway.

“Hannibal,” Jack grouses. "I've been waiting for your call." He sounds half-asleep.

“Jack. How bad is it?” Hannibal can always count on his business manager to not mince words.

“Are you sitting down?”

Hannibal looks around the beautifully furnished three-bedroom apartment. It reminds him of a cottage in Nantucket. Lots of pale wood. A nautical theme. Simple. Divine.

“Hannibal?”

Hannibal takes a seat. “I’m ready.”

“The press says you’ve come out and you're going to give up your career to become a prince. That the coronation pictures gave them the right to publish the file they have on you. It’s all over TMZ. Page Six. Pictures of you with your co-stars. The recent ones of you dining out with Tobias. All your nude photos.”

Hannibal bends in the chair until his forehead touches his feet.

“Are you listening, Hannibal?”

“Yes.”

“The studio is freaking out.”

“I can only imagine. I'm freaking out.”

“The producers in Cannes say you bailed on your promotional duties today without advance notice.”

“I should’ve called you, earlier, to handle it.”

“From the pictures, it's pretty clear you've been busy.”

"The pictures?"

He bites his lip. He remembers he came here to take his pills. He will not have the half glass of wine as he’s already had some champagne. And it can be deadly to mix the meds and the alcohol. He finds his bags in the bedroom on a trunk. He hopes his watches that Dior lent him can be returned while he’s in Denmark. He doesn’t want to run into problems with his fashion contracts, too. He locates his pills and pops two.

Jack is talking about Tobias. “He feels you’ve humiliated him, Hannibal. He’s requesting a meeting with the studio attorneys and your agents. With or without you.”

“I can’t leave for a few days. The funeral’s tomorrow.”

“This is urgent, Hannibal.”

“I know. But Will's my priority.”

There is silence on the line as Jack absorbs that. As Hannibal settles in with that. Finally: “I received an email from the King's Office on the marriage papers.”

Hannibal covers his mouth. He hadn't quite believed there was a proposal on the table. A gasp escapes him.

"That was some lede you buried, Jack."

"Forgive me. I thought you knew you were getting married."

"Not exactly… It's complicated."

"Here're the highlights of the terms. They want $4 million for the dowry and for you to pay for the rental and upkeep of a private jet. Until you die or he dies."

Hannibal holds his breath.

"Your duties will include, but will not be limited to, the nonprofit boards picked by the King and basically attending to all of his personal needs. You will be given a royal budget that you must not exceed every year. And there's a loyalty clause where it's very clear they will make divorcing him very difficult for you."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Then yes to all the terms."

"Hannibal," Jack sighs. "Do you even know this man?"

"Barely and yet completely. It doesn't make sense, I know. I –"

"Come home first. Think about it. This is your entire career. Is he worth your entire career?" This is the rub for Hannibal. How did his career become the block for following his dreams? Jack continues: "You don't have to answer that right now. We can sell one of the properties to cover the dowry and set up a trust for the jet. But just to be clear, there's no turning back from this if you go forward with this marriage. Do you understand –"

Ecstatic, Hannibal is smiling and nodding and laughing. He wishes he hadn't taken the pills. Hearing this news would've settled him down. He just needed to know that he hadn't misunderstood where he was with Will.

"…listening?"

"Yes, Jack, I'm here."

"I'm sending you a plane ticket from Copenhagen to Toronto. You're taking the redeye in two days. Wait until you talk to the studio before you make any decision."

"Alright, Jack. Thank you."

Jack has been with him since he moved to the States and seen him through the ups and downs of his career. He can't imagine the pressure Jack's under if the studio suspects Hannibal's

walking off Tobias' film. Let alone his carefully crafted image being dismantled by the tabloids.

Hannibal pulls up Freddie Lounds' website, The Tattler. One of his favorite photos of himself -- his back arched, his hips raised, his dick on full display, with his face contorted in pain -- fills his phone screen. The headline: "Is this King Will's new wife?"

The royal photo of Will and Hannibal before the coronation follows his nude blowup. They are standing in a natural pose. Will gazing at the camera and Hannibal gazing at Will. "Friends, my ass." Freddie's headline blares. "First Royal Husbands."

Hannibal has to admit it's a really good, super gay photo. He practically beams as he considers what it would mean for Will to be his husband. For Will to want Hannibal as his husband.

He thumbs up to the next image, where he stands on the balcony, gazing at Will giving his first address. "Why Is This Man Here?"

Oh, Freddie.

He doesn't dare look at the thousands of comments awaiting his perusal. Hannibal sets the phone down on the bed and heads back to Will's apartment.

He hopes Will won't notice how heated his face is.

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Hannibal rushes down the hall, eager to see his future husband's apartment. He enters and takes in the surprisingly modern design. The foyer walls are covered from the high ceiling to the hardwood floor with rock'n'roll photos of famous rock stars and album covers. The decorating reflects the bad boy image that Will has been cultivating throughout his years.

And then it becomes a cavern as the main living room is darkened and trashed. Two racks of clothing stand in the center of the room. The couch snakes along the wall. At least the drugs and empty booze bottles have been removed.

He crosses into the kitchen, where there are four places set for dinner and the food in the bowls has cooled. Hannibal realizes he's been gone for a long time.

Beyond the kitchen is a long hallway leading to a bedroom and the door is slightly ajar.

"Will?" Hannibal calls. He grows anxious again. His husband had seemed on edge when he'd left him. Something about what Beverly had done to Frederick...

He moves down the hallway and pushes open the door. He stands frozen as he gazes at Alana crawling toward him, struggling to get away. Beverly is sprawled out on the bed, bound to it,

drugged out of her mind, clearly hallucinating.

“Hannibal,” Alana croaks out. “Help us.”

He steps over her and rushes to Will coming out of the bedroom. Will holds a serrated knife in his hand.

“Will,” Hannibal manages to keep his voice level, easy. He reaches for the knife and grips Will's hand in his own. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

Hannibal tries to reason with him. “They have to appear at the funeral tomorrow. Beverly is Frederick’s wife. Alana is one of Bedelia’s closest advisors. Both of them can't go missing.”

“I need to know why they killed my father. Now step aside, Hannibal.”

Hannibal doesn’t budge and won’t let him move past him. The steel in Will’s eye convinces him he’s completely willing to throw away the crown that he’s gained today. Hannibal matches his gaze, as his life’s on the line too.

“Let me help you, Will. Let me talk to them first. And then we’ll see how we can clean this up. In whatever way you decide.”

Will takes him in and sees that he’s serious. That Hannibal will do anything for him.

“Okay,” Will agrees.

End of an Era

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal completes WIll's plan for revenge, and a bond is formed, for better or for worse.

Chapter Notes

> To my sweet commenters and kudo-makers -- big hugs and much love. I seriously acquire some block after I hit Chapter 3/4 in multi-chapter fics. But I pushed on imagining you sitting out there, going wtf, don't leave us at a cliffhanger. Things got a little moved around, blah blah blah boring writing process stuff. I may take a few days to clean up Chapter 6, but it's almost there. We will make it down the home stretch, I promise.

Hannibal catches up with Alana, who's scratched and crawled her way into the kitchen. He hovers over her until she forces herself to look up and meet his fury. He drags her up to her feet by her hair.

"What did he give you?" Hannibal says, taking in the forgotten meal on the table.

"Stadol. A banned substance for – "

"I know what it's for. Have you started hallucinating?"

"Not yet."

"Make yourself throw up and then do everything I say. Do you understand?"

Alana nods and then grips the counter before plunging three fingers down her throat. Her dinner and the wine surge up and spill into the wastebasket Hannibal places at her feet. Tears smart in her eyes.

She struggles to catch her breath before another wave of nausea overwhelms her and retches past her throat. Hannibal retrieves a glass of water from the table and hands it to her. She flushes her mouth, spitting the water into the wastebasket.

She wipes her lips with the back of her hand and steps away from Hannibal.

"Why are you helping me?" she says warily, her voice cracking.

“You’re good at your job. Smart. Discreet. I know that Bedelia values loyalty. I wanted to reward yours.”

“Mine?” she laughs bitterly.

“You’re the only one in this palace who hasn’t insulted Will to my face.”

Her eyes flash. When she looks at him this time, he sees an understanding.

“You would let him slice Beverly up over an insult?” she asks, incredulous.

“I wouldn’t stop him, no,” responds Hannibal. They share a look. What she sees in Hannibal’s eyes scares her. “He believes she killed his father and brother. I trust his judgment. If you know something about this, you need to tell him now, before I look the other way when the time comes to gut you.”

“And if I say what happened?”

“I may be able to save you. For now. I would suggest that after the funeral you turn in a letter of resignation. And get as far away from here as you possibly can.”

Hannibal is cold. Unfeeling. Patient, as he waits for her to make up her mind.

“How will I be reassured he won’t chase me down after a few months?”

“Because you have my word.”

“I wish we could play by their rules, but you’ll see, Hannibal, it doesn’t work that way. You’ll see," Alana cries, shaking her head bitterly. "The rules don’t apply to them as they do to us.”

A sob racks through her body. She feels sorry for Hannibal, for herself. She had been so idealistic once. So in love with the history of the monarchy. And a dear friend of Beverly’s. Now she's ready to save herself despite their friendship.

“The cruelty in the palace had gotten to Beverly. And after decades of trying to play by the rules and always falling short, Frederick was tired of the games too. Einar was still going strong, still making news and holding summits and he had no intention of stepping aside for Frederick to be king while he was still young and vital. Beverly wanted the crown for him too. They just wanted to scare him. They knew he hated flying. It would be a small accident that would give Frederick his opening as regent if Einar was incapacitated. This was Frederick’s attempt to be a hero, to be a king.”

Behind her, Will stands in the doorway, listening.

“Why didn’t you stop him, if you knew?” Will asks.

“I hated how Frederick was being denied, how Beverly was being treated. I saw it and I empathized. You weren’t here, Will,” she turns to look at him. “You wouldn’t participate in any of it and Frederick was left to his own devices.”

“Frederick loved Einar,” insists Will. “He wouldn’t hurt him.”

“All the royals eventually hurt the ones they love. Frederick was no different and Beverly pushed him to want it all too. They never expected to lose control of the situation. For Frederick to literally lose control of the helicopter when he was so close to having it all.”

Alana appeals to Hannibal to save her as Will considers her words. The drug has made her tongue loose. She can’t tell if they will let her live or die. She is on her knees. She could beg for her life, but there’s no life outside of the job she has. Nothing compares to living in the palace.

“And how do you know all of this?” Hannibal asks.

“I’m the private secretary and lady-in-waiting for the Queen Mother. It was my job to know everything. To be Beverly’s friend. I was just an observer. Merely curious what would happen -- “

Hannibal grabs the heavy cutting board on the counter and slams it over her head. Alana blacks out.

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For the rest of the night, Will sits in the common hall on the first floor, where the two coffins rest in state. Someone in the staff drifts by and notices the King. Various attendants emerge from the early morning shadows to ask him if he needs anything, but they are waved away.

Hannibal, an old Hollywood hat at manipulating the gossip pages, leaks to The Tattler that the King has stayed with his father and brother all night. It's a good alibi. He sends the information through a dummy email he’s set up for these occasions. Calls himself “Travis”.

He is almost amused by Freddie’s relentless barrage of questions. How did Will propose? (Poorly, Hannibal thinks.) What was their first date like and when was it? (Last night over Alana Bloom’s body?) He grows tired of his phone pinging every 5 seconds.

Wrapping things up, “Travis” demands to be quoted as a “palace source”, and in exchange for this morsel and future tidbits, Hannibal secures her promise not to post the nude photos from his past. If the other tabloids follow her lead, once they see the exclusives, he will spread the gossip around to shape the narrative.

Within 10 minutes of their email exchange, the exclusive is posted, and the nude photo of Hannibal is pushed off the “front page” of her website.

The Crown’s Communication Director has been waiting for him outside his apartment when he wakes in the morning. James greets Hannibal with a breakfast tray and a carafe of coffee. He suggests for Hannibal to get this meeting out of the way.

Brian Zeller enters Hannibal's apartment and introduces himself. He gives Hannibal a new phone that has a tracking device for “matters of his personal safety” and various ways they can trace any confidentiality breaches. Hannibal has cleaned his device and gives up his phone so that Brian can import his contacts and data into the new, palace-issued one.

And then Brian gets down to the business of Hannibal’s engagement to Will.

“The Palace is not ready to issue a statement about your relationship,” Hannibal is told without ceremony. “With the funeral dominating the headlines, we want to keep the focus on honoring the dead and the transition Will is making as King.”

Hannibal nods his understanding. Brian hands him a leather, insignia-embossed folder. In it, on heavy linen paper sits the royal press office letterhead, giving the official talking points on how Will and Hannibal met and the timeline on how the palace will proceed with the engagement announcement. Hannibal glances over the document with a practiced eye and hands it back to Brian.

“Was this discussed with His Majesty?” Hannibal asks.

“Not yet. Queen Bedelia will be advising him during the transition. These are her suggestions.”

“I see.”

Brian catches Hannibal’s tone. “We value your input and I’m happy to be a liaison to her office on how you want to mold the story.”

“It’s rather, shall we say, old-school, to spin that Will and I exchanged letters after meeting in Spain last year,” Hannibal starts, cautiously. “It’s safer to say a mutual friend introduced us while I was filming in London last summer. We met at a private dinner party she threw at her flat.”

“Who is this mutual friend?” Brian interrupts.

Hannibal considers who Will would know. Who he could persuade to confirm this story with the bait of a wedding invitation and a photo with the two.

“Keira Knightly. Isn’t she a patron on one of his charity boards?”

Brian flips through his phone for the file on Will. “Yes, she is. Excellent choice.”

“I’ll confirm if she’ll agree to play matchmaker. And then I’ll let you handle her requests. This mustn’t go to any underlings. Anyone who I connect you with must stay within the inner circle of you, Will, the Queen Mother and myself. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Brian nods, reconsidering his take on Hannibal as a flighty, relationship-starved actor. Hannibal certainly is not timid. Beverly had taken years before she pushed back and began making her own demands. He will have to warn Bedelia and the rest of the staff that that have a live one on their hands.

“You have my word,” Brian promises.

Hannibal fleshes out the tale they are weaving for his courtship with Will. “After Keira’s spontaneous dinner party slash`blind date’, Will and I then would call on each other whenever we were in the same city to hang out as friends. Cooking homemade meals, watching Netflix, going bowling, etc.”

Hannibal watches Brian take down these notes. Brian looks up expectantly, waiting for more.

“And when did it turn romantic?” Brian naturally asks.

Good question. Hannibal returns briefly to last night, when he and Will had put on the finishing touches to their tableau in Beverly's apartment. Will had walked Hannibal through the maze of underground tunnels, avoiding the palace cameras, back to Hannibal's apartment. He did not invite himself in, instead merely saying thank you and goodnight.

Hannibal is at a loss for their decidedly non-romantic, lightening fast courtship.

“The less detail on that, the better, don’t you think?" Hannibal finally answers. "We maintain what we’ve been saying. That we’re friends. And we’ll insist that we are friends until we can't deny it any longer. Anyone can go back over the year and see who Will was actually going out with. Let our relationship play out in the public eye. I have no engagement ring,” Hannibal holds up his ringless ring finger, which he wants to rectify as soon as possible. He wants a proper marriage proposal. And he isn’t too proud to use Brian to make it happen.

Brian tucks the folder under his arm, impressed. “It’s a good plan. I’ll let you know if Her Majesty has any objections to it, but I’ll advise her to go with your story.”

“I should let you know I will be leaving in a few days to return to work. I will be expected to remain for at least three months in Canada, with a few weeks in Iceland. If Will wants to be seen with me, he can visit me on set or we can maintain this private dinner at home scenario.”

“I’ll find out how we should proceed.”

“And what is the protocol with how I address the King and am seen with him –“

Brian is pulling out a binder from his attache when James enters the apartment in a rush. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but we have an emergency situation and I’m afraid you’re needed, Brian.”

Brian glances at Hannibal to see how he handles the palace in crisis mode. To his relief, Hannibal’s face is in neutral. Hannibal sets aside his coffee and waits for James to explain.

“Princess Beverly is in some kind of stupor. She keeps repeating that she’s King Einar. That everyone is out to kill her. Alana Bloom was found in her bathtub, practically drowned. They look to have been drinking all night…”

“Will Alana be alright?” Hannibal asks, concerned.

“They don’t know.”

"And what of Beverly?" Brian asks.

“Mad with grief,” Hannibal tuts, watching Brian watch his performance, striking just the right note.

“Next meeting, we’ll get into the details of the wedding preparations,” Brian yields. “I’m sorry to cut this short.”

Brian and James depart. Hannibal is impressed they didn’t run out. They have been trained to maintain the cool image of the palace even in the midst of tragedy. It’s a lesson well served.

Hannibal turns on the TV to the local news channel. The ambulance pulls out of the palace courtyard, with Bedelia’s car following. The lines wrap around the city block into the palace courtyard, heads turning, as the public comes to pay their respects. The camera pans over to find Will, his head bowed, who has not moved from his position by his father’s side.

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Hannibal has slept most of the day. The dead sleep of a guilty man. His first thought, when he wakes, is of Will. How he has been up all night and how dissatisfied he must be that Beverly and Alana remain alive when Einar and Frederick are dead. His heart hurts for him and only him.

He had fallen asleep with the TV on. It has typically been his traveling bedroom companion. He likes the white noise of it, and when he focuses on the sound upon awakening, it soothes him to know what country he’s in. He recognizes the Danish from the newscast. The Nordic royalty descending on the Copenhagen Cathedral. The foreign dignitaries arriving from America and France who had supported Einar’s climate change summits. The diplomats, even, who had opposed his open borders argument towards the refugees.

Will, he imagines, will pull another all-nighter to secure Einar’s agenda. He may not even see him before he has to leave for Toronto.

The newscast has somehow gotten permission to go inside the Cathedral to show the way the church has been decorated. The flowers, the candles and coats of arms are loaded with meaning to signify the high estate of the deceased. The castrum doloris includes an elaborate baldachin, the canopy of state placed over the altar waiting to receive the coffins of Einar and Frederick. In the seating arrangement he caught a glimpse of last night, Hannibal would sit several rows behind Will to account for Beverly’s family and the extended royal family. There would be some empty spaces now.

The coverage extends to the crowds gathering along the main boulevard where the funeral procession will take place. Today was marked a national day of mourning and the Danish schools and offices were closed so that the country could gather in Copenhagen and pay their

respects. The public that had filled the palace courtyard now line the street leading from the palace to the cathedral.

Brian must be working overtime, as there is no mention of Beverly and Alana. The power of the palace, dictating the narrative if the press wants future access. Hannibal had to believe Will when he told him the palace would not let an investigation happen.

Hannibal doesn't quite know how he feels about that. About this new role he played in hurting them. If he's honest with himself, he feels powerful and scared. If this is how they went out, what lies ahead for him? And what if someone will need to take the blame? If Will asks him to take the fall on his sword for this, even though he was assured the palace would cover for him? He has lived a full life. He feels confident he would be able to survive going to prison.

A sigh escapes him. He's actually fine with doing time for Will. He doesn't quite know when he became alright with that.

Hannibal pads his way to the bathroom and showers. He cannot dwell on Beverly and Alana. He has to embrace what lies ahead. How Will must secure his legacy and navigate the world stage with a prince, instead of a princess, at his side. He doesn't even know if Will wants him at the funeral. James will have to let him know. But he will be prepared.

Hannibal pulls the toiletry bag from his suitcase and takes in his pill bottle. He considers if he needs to take another couple of Xanax and finds he's calm and collected, all things considered. This is not how he expected to be reacting.

He takes in his reflection as he shaves. He is different from the man who woke up yesterday in Cannes. Guarded and full of secrets. But maybe he's always been this way. Maybe being around Will has forced himself to see this.

He slicks back his hair with gel and puts some product on his face and concludes he's too far-gone for Botox. And dyeing his hair is not going to change the fact that he's a decade older than Will.

He shrugs on his dark Dior dress shirt and slacks, and waits for further instruction. He browses through the protocol binder that Brian left. Bored with that, he drifts over to the full-length mirror. Checks himself out -- front, side, back. He still cuts a dashing figure.

Will has to take him as is.

He reaches for his new cellphone, which is probably tapped. He dreads the call he has to make, but better to get it over with. He mans up by calling through Facetime and justifies himself as being only half-cowardly.

Tobias picks up immediately.

"Hannibal," he sighs. "Nice of you to finally call."

Hannibal takes in Tobias' strained face. They are both doing their best to maintain.

“Can we please not talk about business?” Hannibal requests. “Just us.”

“I’m all ears.”

“I’m a jerk to have let you find out in the news this way.”

“So it’s true? Jack tried to explain what happened at Cannes and frankly sounded just as clueless as anyone else. So you’re seriously engaged to marry the King of Denmark?”

“Yes.”

Hannibal still has a look of disbelief on his face. Tobias considers him.

“How did this happen, Hannibal?”

“It just happened. I wish I could tell you more, but I can’t… Tobias, I can’t see you anymore. “

“We have been dating for two years. Exclusively, I might add. You told me you loved me. Don’t I deserve to know what happened?”

Hannibal swallows. He runs his fingers over the crook of his neck. He refuses to respond. Like a true royal. When no answer is forthcoming, Tobias’s fury can no longer remain in check.

“You’re breaking up with me over the phone, which is just a step better than sending a text, considering how you ended things with Franklyn.”

Hannibal hates when Tobias brings up Franklyn. Franklyn attended many of Hannibal’s parties in the Hollywood Hills. He was a screenwriter who liked to talk about the next script he was writing as The Greatest Script, and so he was in high demand in the studio system. It was Hannibal’s job to find his next great role and Franklyn promised to write it for him. And for awhile, he was Franklyn’s muse and occasional hookup. Unfortunately, Hannibal couldn’t take anyone seriously who talked about their work the way Franklyn did. Every film Hannibal had starred in he was sure he was going to get fired from it. He never thought he was doing a good enough job, let alone a great one.

And then one July Fourth, Franklyn hosted a barbeque where Hannibal met Tobias. He knew Franklyn considered Tobias a great friend, but Franklyn described everyone this way. But in the group photo Tobias had taken at Franklyn’s party, Tobias had made a scathing remark that all the people who surrounded Franklyn were just business acquaintances. None of the people close to Franklyn would truly call themselves Franklyn’s friend.

He vowed to himself to not tolerate these fake relationships to only advance his career. Hannibal had texted Franklyn to end things. When he thinks about it now, he wonders if what part of his past with Franklyn can apply to his present with Will. Hannibal worries what is being repeated, what role is he playing now? Back then, he had simply gone to bed with Tobias that night. Found him funny and sexy and outspoken in ways that were charming.

The problem with them was they were always working. Never once in their two years did they talk about moving in or taking their relationship to another level. It was always about flying to some location to stay in bed all weekend. They rarely were seen out in public together.

Tobias looks away as the tears begin to flow. Hannibal feels like shit.

“I never cheated on you, Tobias,” Hannibal allows. “Will and I haven’t slept together. I just, I fell in love with him.”

This does not placate Tobias. “Hannibal Lecter, as the virgin bride? You’ve got to be kidding me. So what is this – your greatest role ever?”

Now the tears flow down Hannibal’s face. “Please don’t…”

But that’s what he loved about Tobias. He calls it the way it is. Hannibal has no proof that Will loves him. And as for his feelings? Was it calculating and aimed to benefit him in any way?

After the blows he struck last night, after telling Jack to sell away his properties and prepare for the end of his career, he has been willing to sacrifice everything from his freedom to his dream to gain a husband.

He chooses not to explain himself to Tobias. There's no point.

Hannibal straightens his neck and fights back his tears. He finds it within himself to be crushing to the point of cruelty. It would make Bedelia proud.

"Neither of us were willing to put each other before our work and travel. This was inevitable, Tobias. I wish you nothing but happiness in wherever life takes you next.”

And Hannibal ends the call.

_*_

A quick knock on the door. It’s almost familiar now, James’ knock. Hannibal wipes the moisture on his cheeks and stumbles to rise as James and the staff wheel in the familiar jewelry carts. A variety of dark suits hang from a rack. There are shoes, hats, gloves. It reminds him of his own personal pop-up store. Except these pieces were handed down generation after generation. Priceless because it remained within this family.

Cart after cart is pushed in. He raises an eyebrow at James, who doesn’t answer. Hannibal watches as they file out and Will glides inside.

Hannibal bows his head and with his eyes lowered, waits for Will to approach. Hannibal can feel the electric charge between them, of how Will’s proximity causes his entire body to

alight.

“How are you, Hannibal?”

Hannibal’s cheeks are blotchy. His eyes puffy from crying. Hannibal doesn’t want Will to feel concerned about his loyalty nor does he want to admit that he broke up with his boyfriend on Facetime.

“I’m fine,” Hannibal insists. “You?”

“It’s very sweet of you to ask,” is Will’s non-answer.

Hannibal is distracted by the jewelry. Several rings are featured prominently before him.

“I don’t want this to be a quid pro quo,” Hannibal whispers.

Will runs a finger over a thick gold band with the thinnest strand of rubies curving its edge. Hannibal’s Adam’s apple bobs with an absolute thirst for it.

“What is it you want for being so good to me?” Will’s voice is lilting, seductive. “You can have anything you want.”

Their heads turn simultaneously to regard each other.

“Anything.”

Hannibal considers his options. He has gone into premieres covered in over ten million dollars worth of expensive jewelry the fashion houses put on loan to him. But this ring would be his, would mean so much more. He pushes that thought aside. He had laid out his plan to Brian and there was no point in tossing that aside.

“I think that would make an excellent choice in a few months,” Hannibal sighs, unhappily.

“So how can I reward you now?” murmurs Will.

“I want you to bring the children you think are out there home, to the palace,” Hannibal states. “I was abandoned by both my parents when I was a child. My uncle and his wife eventually took me in and did their best to make up for what was done to me. I suspect you didn't have it easy either, Will. This is our opportunity to make up for that. To correct what was done to both of us and make up for lost time and show your children a normal life, or as close to normal –“

Will nods quietly and Hannibal stops talking before he ruins it by insulting Will – or his family, for that matter. Will is startled by Hannibal. Constantly amazed by his insight and dedication and compassion towards him.

“My father could not protect me from Bedelia or Frederick. I never thought I'd make much of a father.“

“We can try,” Hannibal volunteers.

“I’ll let Brian know to meet with you about it.”

Will reaches into his jacket and pulls out the revised talking points on how they met. Hannibal recognizes the letterhead and Brian's notes right away.

“Why are you going back to work if you want to build a family with me?” Will drills him. He doesn’t care how selfish it sounds. He thought Hannibal was clear on what committing to him and the crown meant. “Why are we waiting to announce our engagement when I told you what I wanted.”

Hannibal stammers and struggles to answer. Will cuts him off.

“I told you I wanted you by my side. Don’t play games with me, Hannibal. Especially now.”

Hannibal blinks and inhales. This was not what he was expecting.

Will tosses the document on the couch and reaches for the ring that he had eyed earlier. He takes Hannibal’s hand and slips the ring on his finger. Will assesses it on his hand as a good fit. He nods approvingly and meets Hannibal’s watery gaze.

“You are the heart of this family, Hannibal. And you of all people should be aware that nobility doesn't answer to anybody else. I will do my best to protect you from the vultures… but this is our engagement and I expect you to remain here, with me, at the palace."

Hannibal nods, trying not to gasp and flail and pass out.

“Shall we go?” Will asks, impatient. “Close one chapter and open the other?”

Hannibal silently nods again. He doesn’t trust his voice. Will slides a heather gray jacket with tails off the rack. He holds it out for Hannibal to slip into. Will buttons the jacket up and knots a gray tie around Hannibal's neck. Hannibal notices that Will wears soft gray gloves, but Will doesn't hand him any. Hannibal’s hands and therefore the ring will be exposed to the public. He visibly gulps.

“Will,” Hannibal strokes the ring. “I have to wrap things up in Canada. I have contracts I need to sign to sell my property and other business to attend to. I won’t be gone long.”

“Good. That, I can understand. I'm not completely unreasonable.”

He takes Hannibal’s hand and kisses his ring. Hannibal’s right hand flutters to his mouth.

Hannibal has somehow walked to the first floor common room where the Bishop of Copenhagen says a brief prayer for the dead and the small crowd chants the old Danish hymns.

“He hath for every grief

Blest comfort too holds the peaceful night

With gladness we hail the blessed day

Now out of the sea ascending

Illuming the earth upon its way

And cheer to all mortals lending.

God grant that His children everywhere

May prove that the night is ending."

Hannibal glances up at Will's haggard face as he stares ahead at the two coffins, being carried out by members of the Royal Life Guards. Outside, two gun carriages await for the journey across the city to the Cathedral.

Hannibal and Bedelia flank Will as they walk behind the gun carriage, pulled by 48 seamen and escorted by honor guards from the Danish Army, Air Force and Navy, as well as honor guards from France, Sweden, the U.K. and the United States.

Bedelia catches sight of the ring on Hannibal's finger and glares at him. He knows she'll take it as a betrayal that will not be forgotten nor forgiven anytime soon. She shoots Will a scalding look before breaking off from the procession to take a moment to accept flowers from the crowd.

The cameras have followed every leg of this journey. As is custom, Hannibal walks slightly behind Will until Will's head hangs heavy with his grief and he slows in step with Hannibal.

Will keeps his eyes focused on the old city cobblestones. Another ancient road that he finds himself on. It holds many stories, he's sure. From the legacy that has been created by his father to the journey of the Kings before him. Of the legacy he will be expected to build now that he's succeeded Einar and Frederick.

When they climb the steps to the Cathedral, Hannibal wonders if this is where he will get married in a few months. If Will's grief will still have a grip on him. If Bedelia will discover what they did to a princess and her lady-in-waiting and what the payback will be. If Jack, the closest person alive who has tried to take care of him, will walk him down the aisle.

The cameras flash as the family gathers in front of the Cathedral before the caskets are taken inside. Hannibal can sense the media firestorm that will be unleashed from his presence by Will's side. He can feel the onslaught of questions already being catapulted to the Crown Press Office. They will be unprepared to release a statement, judging by the shade Bedelia threw their way.

Hannibal's nervous habit of brushing back his hair and touching his face now apparently extends to rubbing his ring with his thumb. He hopes he's not checking if it's really there. If this is really happening. He grimaces as he steps into the Cathedral and presses closer to Will as heads turn to watch them make their way down the aisle.

The Catacombs

Chapter Summary

> Will buries his father and meets his Cabinet. Bedelia and the Royal Court reject Hannibal as the future-Prince Consort, but Hannibal is determined for Will to fulfill his duty.

The funeral march through the Cathedral commences and all rise. The organ and trumpets sound as the caskets are carried into the church. The Graham sword of arms and the red and white Danish flag are draped on Frederick's casket, along with his Danish Air Force peaked cap. Bedelia follows behind it. Einar's casket is draped in the royal House of Graham flag with his crown at its foot. Will and Hannibal follow behind the King's. Other members of the royal family encircle the atrium that encloses the canopy where the caskets come to a rest.

Will steps into the canopy and kneels.

"King Einar and Prince Frederick are dead!" the cantor calls out. "Long live King Will!"

The mourners respond by repeating the chant and outside miniature Danish flags are waved by the tens of thousands of subjects who have gathered to watch. The mood is a mixture of mourning for the late King and Prince, loved by their easy-going and informal manners, and curiosity and derision for the new king and his handsome companion.

In the catacombs, Einar and Frederick are laid to their final resting place, interred in the Cathedral. Here, Will lets his tears flow freely, hot on his cheeks. The small gathering of European royalty file out while Will and Hannibal remain.

He kisses his father's casket for the final time and reaches for Hannibal's hand. "I should've killed Frederick when I had the chance," he murmurs thickly.

Hannibal takes his hand and guides him to light a candle instead. "You did what you could." "And you're okay with what we did?" This is where they're going to discuss this apparently. Hannibal leans against the wall and licks his lips.

He concedes, "We have a lot to learn about each other."

"Yes, we do. And I look forward to what I'll discover."

Hannibal reassures him that he's weird and he can take all the different facets of Will's weirdness. Will crosses to him, relieved. Hannibal almost feels Will would have gathered him in his arms, but a guard appears. The carriages are waiting for him. Instead, Will tilts his head, indicating to Hannibal they should go. As Hannibal follows behind him, he has to admit he couldn't be more in love. And hungry for Will's touch.

Outside, they file down the stairs of the Cathedral where Bedelia awaits inside the family's horse-drawn carriage. Will helps Hannibal climb inside and they sit across from Bedelia, whose glare is clear in its disapproval.

"Will, you can't put off meeting with the cabinet much longer. They're waiting for you in the private residence."

"Now?"

"Some things, apparently, can't wait," Bedelia sighs, bitterly. She excludes Hannibal further from the conversation by switching to Danish.

"And what do you mean by that?" Will replies in his native tongue, much to Hannibal's annoyance.

"The audacity to flaunt your relationship in front of the Catholic Church when all eyes are on this country?" she shakes her head. "Are you happy? You have everyone's attention."

"Good," Will sighs. Hannibal blinks, looking silently between them, helpless and unable to respond to what clearly affects him too.

_*_

The cabinet has gathered in Bedelia's sitting room, waiting for Will to preside over his first formal meeting. The pressure is on and it's back in the form of Prime Minister Lars Rasmussen, enduring more Corgi torture.

Will and Hannibal follow Bedelia to her quarters and enter. He introduces Hannibal to his cabinet, and Hannibal goes down the line with Will, shaking hands. Behind him, he can hear the stage-whispers seeping into his consciousness, like an annoying buzz.

"What are they saying?" asks Hannibal.

Will pauses to listen and his lips disappear, out of annoyance. He translates the crude remarks about Hannibal being another commoner and a surprising selection at that. He realizes he shouldn't've the moment the words are out of his mouth. Hannibal looks stricken.

Will clasps Hannibal's hand in his. Trying to comfort, but it only draws attention to them. Hannibal pulls his hand away, self-conscious. Will holds his gaze, trying to balance Hannibal's acute sensitivity to wanting Hannibal to fight for himself in this tough arena. He reminds Hannibal that he is a fighter. That his spirit is what attracted him. That he knew he could handle this. Hannibal nods through the pep talk, unsure if he really has what it takes to survive the royal court. He still has to go out into the main hall and meet The Family. Without Will or Bedelia.

"Will you wait up for me?" Will asks. "I shouldn't be more than an hour."

“Take as long as you need. I’ll be up,” Hannibal promises.

Hannibal hurries out, head spinning, and Will turns to Lars to begin the bizarre tradition where Lars offers his and his liberal party government’s resignation. In keeping with tradition, Will rejects their resignation.

“As King,” Will addresses Lars, “I implore you and your ministers to remain in the Cabinet.”

Now that the ceremonial part is over, Will is brought up to speed by Lars on what concerns the nation and the legislation they are proposing. Occasionally, Bedelia will whisper in his ear to give him a different opinion on the matter.

The meeting extends over its scheduled hour as Will shares his own agenda, and as Bedelia watches in amazement, that the visiting foreign dignitaries are called out of the funeral feast to join the meeting. Future summits are scheduled. Deals are discussed. No one is allowed to leave until Will senses a solution is at hand. She grows alarmed as she watches her wayward son assert himself and his authority. He does not diminish hers, seeming to value her input. But there’s no denying that Will has seriously arrived.

_*_

Hannibal mingles amongst the foreign dignitaries and royal families, seemingly a man without a country. The royals treat him as the commoner he is and the dignitaries are only amused by his celebrity. He watches as the palace staff file in and take the dignitaries out of the party to work. The few people who wanted to be seen with him suddenly disappear. He drifts around, but no one engages with him. Maybe it's the language barrier, but he doesn't think it's that. They clearly turn their nose at even having a conversation with him. The hostility is worse than anything he experienced as a misfit in high school.

After he finishes eating, he bolts out of the hall and escapes to his apartment and asks James to call in Brian.

Brian immediately takes note of the ring on his finger.

“When did that happen?” blurts out Brian.

“The days are becoming a blur,” Hannibal admits. “This morning, I think? Definitely this morning. What will this make me? The Prince consort?”

“Yes.”

Hannibal soaks in the ring and thumbs it. “How is Princess Beverly? And Alana?”

“Their conditions have not changed.”

Hannibal nods, worried. Brian catches his look and reassures him. “Don’t think about it. Don’t worry about... The Queen Mother won’t discuss it any further.”

Hannibal weighs if this is a good thing. So Bedelia knows and won't let anyone hold it over them but her. He swallows and starts over.

“The King wants us to tell the truth,” Hannibal shares, “about how we really met. We’ve of course seen each other in passing. But technically, we met on the day his father died and he became king. He gave me an engagement ring a day later.”

Brian scribbles this down in his tablet. He looks up and takes a deep breath.

“It really happened that quickly?” Brian processes. And then looks at Hannibal’s engagement ring. Apparently. “If you were me, how would you frame the story you just told me?”

Hannibal considers this test and how it will play out when Brian reports this back to Bedelia. He sinks back in his chair.

“Most of us are not the same person we were 20 years ago, let alone yesterday. Nor should we be. Didn’t a famous boxing legend say that?”

It’s a good enough answer for Brian. He pushes forward.

“When do you want to announce?”

“It depends on you,” Hannibal exchanges a look with him. “I want Will’s children to be at the announcement. It’s imperative that he honors at least one facet of his duty.”

“Do you really want to know about the kids?” Brian frowns. Hannibal nods.

Brian pulls up Will’s file and passes the tablet to Hannibal.

“There’ve been numerous claims and most came up with inconclusive or negative results. These two were positive DNA matches, meeting the 97% threshold.”

Hannibal gazes at the photos of Abigail over the years. Her most recent high school picture comes up.

“Abigail Hobbs. She’s 17. Will had gone to Vegas for his 22nd birthday. Her mother was a beautiful showgirl.”

“Does she know?”

“Well, her mother calls us every year for her check, but I wouldn’t know.”

A 14-month-old baby boy gazes at him. Hannibal gasps. He looks exactly like Will.

“That’s Axel. He’s in Nova Scotia. Very random circumstances.”

“Drugs?”

“Yes. The mother is on the verge of losing the child. He’s with his grandparents now.”

Hannibal wrings his hands. He bites back what should so obviously be done. Instead, he opts for diplomacy:

“Has he met his children?”

“No.”

“No?”

They share a look. Brian explains, “Queen Bedelia thought the less contact the better.”

“These are her grandchildren. Abigail could be Queen one day.”

“At the time, that’s not how we saw it.”

“Has Abigail been in contact? Is she curious to meet him?”

“I don’t – “

“If it’s a matter of relocation, housing, they should be here. With us. There’re plenty of apartments or… there’s another castle in the north, right?”

“And Roskilde.”

“We must offer their families accommodations. We want these children with us, Brian. Tell Bedelia that.”

“Hannibal,” Brian cautions. “They would come out of the woodwork.”

“Let them. There’s enough room here for them all.”

Hannibal gazes at him, firm. Brian stands to go, but Hannibal stops him.

“I want to call them. Now. It’s early there, but they should be up.”

Brian hesitates. “If we start this process, Hannibal, there’s no turning back. I’ve known Will for fifteen years. He’ll stick with something for a week, at most, and then it’s back to square one. And then it will be on you.”

“So be it,” Hannibal rises, decided.

_*_

The sun is rising by the time Will knocks on Hannibal’s door. He slips inside and finds Hannibal sitting on the couch, staring into the middle distance. Hannibal looks up, exhausted.

“You waited for me,” Will half-smiles.

“I said I would.”

Hannibal stands across the room from him.

“What is it?”

“I talked to Abigail. Your daughter. She’ll be here tomorrow. And while I’m in Canada, I’ll pick up Axel. Your son.”

Will crosses the distance between them and crushes his lips to Hannibal. Hannibal’s hands come up to cup Will’s face, the rubies from his ring glinting in the sunlight. The kiss deepens, Hannibal swept up in the feeling of Will’s tongue twisting against his. Will’s smile against his lips. A cascade of emotions courses between them – the funeral, the future, the fear that it could all be taken away.

They take a breath. Will traces a line from Hannibal’s cheekbones to his lips. Hannibal presses his cheek against Will’s, hiding his face.

“I was afraid,” Hannibal admits, “that you didn’t want me this way.”

“You can’t possibly not know that everyone wants to fuck you.”

Hannibal laughs.

“You’re quite fuckable.”

Will’s eyes crinkle as he looks at Hannibal. He sees the worry that still strains his gaze.

“You saw me before we got to Copenhagen. I was a mess. I was unsafe. I should be tested before…”

Will steps back and glances away to get a hold of himself. His hands have bunched up Hannibal's shirt and he pulls back.

“You are precious to me, Hannibal, and of course, I want you, in every way,” Will states. “So until my results come back, can we just sleep in the same bed together?”

They don’t even bother shedding their clothes. They collapse on top of the duvet and curl towards each other. Will wraps Hannibal in his arms, their legs entwined.

Will strokes Hannibal’s hair, feeling his heartbeat against his.

He doesn’t notice when he falls asleep. What seems a sudden development is in actuality a few hours later -- a knock at the apartment door. James's knock.

Will doesn't hear it, doesn't see when James darts out into the hall. Hannibal is stirring him, leaning in for a kiss.

“My love,” Hannibal sighs. “I have to go.”

Canada calls. Will can’t complain, but groans anyway.

“You’ll bring him home?” Will mumbles, half-asleep.

“I will.”

Changes

Chapter Summary

Hannibal takes care of business in Canada, and Will has to introduce his country and the media circus to his family.

Chapter Notes

Super long chapter for the conclusion. Thanks for coming along for the ride.

Hannibal has to admit he's frazzled to leave Will's side just as their intimacy is blossoming. He could have spent the evening alone kissing his face and getting to know the ridge and curve of his mouth. He'd thought how, over time, the shape of Will's mouth would change to reflect the time Hannibal has spent worshipping it.

He touches his lips just imagining it and crosses his legs. His engagement ring catches the glare of lights emanating from the airport. He should turn back now and let the chips fall where they may when it comes to wrapping up his past life. He is terrified to walk away from his career. But he is more terrified to leave Will to his devices and to Bedelia. What if he returns home only to find out that Will has moved on and Bedelia has made him another subject which will not be discussed, as she'd done with anyone else?

Hannibal taps his foot impatiently, on the edge of flight or fight. He is under strict orders by Jack and the titans of Hollywood to make it to Toronto in time for this meeting and part of him still wants to hang onto his career that he's spent most of his lifetime building.

The car parks at the curb and Hannibal pulls his sunglasses lower on his face and puts a baseball cap on his head. He dashes out and makes a beeline through security and for the first class lounge. He is moving so fast that even his security detail has to hustle to keep up.

On the long stretch to the lounge, he catches sight of the tabloids and newspapers on the newsstand. The funeral dominates the headlines, but his relationship with Will has its own column. Hannibal pauses and reaches for The Tattler: "Celebrity In Procession with Royal Family," reads the headline. "In his cabinet meeting, according to several palace sources who spoke on a condition of anonymity, King Will introduced his constant companion not as the beloved international movie star, who has taken the world by storm in cult indie hits and superhero franchises, but as his beloved. Hannibal has been a longtime bachelor and many worried then-Prince Will would never settle down and marry. Other sources confirm that they two barely knew each other when they posed for a photo at Cannes. Instead, two independent

sources insist that a mysterious meeting just three days ago created an emotional connection that transcended convention. King Will popped the question before his coronation, but the two will have to wait to marry until his cabinet passes legislation that will approve a same-sex marriage for the royal family and officially garner the superstar as Prince Consort material. It's a brand new day in Denmark…"

Hannibal blanches and sets the Tattler aside and crosses his arms protectively around himself. The palace has many eyes it would seem. And for being so concerned with leaks, Bedelia didn't shut down this story. The scrutiny and judgment his relationship will be under hasn't even begun and yet this feels like an intrusion. Hannibal slows down as he makes his way down the long corridor, as if in a dream.

He settles into a corner of the first class lounge, in a bit of a stupor. His phone buzzes, jerking him out of it. A text from Jack, making sure he's at the airport. Hannibal twirls his ring around his finger, so tempted to back out now. He's been given a little happiness and he's afraid when he comes back things won't be the same. This is their time to bond and get to know one another. And Abigail will be thrown into their apartment without any buffer to help her.

He wants to talk through his fears with Will, but he's exhausted. He resolves to board the plane. He made a promise to Jack, and surely, his relationship can survive a few days of separation.

"Waiting to get on flight," he texts to Jack. Wincing, he presses send.

_*_

Will stretches and reaches across the pillow for Hannibal before remembering that Hannibal is gone. He settles back against the pillows and deliberates if he should call Hannibal and ask him to return to their apartment.

He is afraid to meet Abigail on his own. He has no idea what he'll say. Why he suddenly chose today of all days to grow up.

He has promised Hannibal he would call her at some point. She will be on the way to the airport now. No time like the present.

He reaches for his cellphone on the nightstand and selects the number that Hannibal has programmed into his phone. He prays silently that her mother will not answer. He has no idea what he would say to her after all these years.

"Hello," a Midwestern twang greets him.

"Is this Abigail Hobbs?" Will asks.

A heavy pause. Then: "Yes."

“Abigail… this is your father, Will Graham.”

A long silence is the response to that. Will’s heart is racing like he’s at Derby coming down the homestretch. He hopes she doesn’t hang up. He doesn’t know if he can do this again. And then he hears what may be called a teenage giggle.

“You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to hear you say that.”

“Forgive me, Abigail. I’ve been a very selfish man.”

Another long pause. A tinny, little-girl voice sounds instead.

“I forgive you. I can’t wait to meet you, Will.”

“And I can’t wait to meet you.”

_*_

The one push he needs to get on the flight is knowing that Will and Abigail need to spend some time together without Hannibal around. It doesn’t change the fact that he’s an emotional wreck when he approaches the gate. With his security detail looking concerned, he drags himself to his feet just as they are ready to shut the doors.

He is dreading what’s waiting for him when he lands – namely, Tobias. And then there’s Kade Purnell from the studio. Everyone is going to try to convince him to stay in his old life and fulfill his obligations and finish a movie when he could play a Prince in real life and remain at the side of his beautiful King.

The flight attendant who takes his ticket gasps at the sight of him. He hates that his very presence gives people such a strong reaction now. Jack had warned him that his celebrity would be nothing in comparison to what royalty has to endure. Nobility is apparently in its own fame universe. The woman is trembling and can’t swipe his digital ticket properly.

“May I give you a hug?” Hannibal suggests.

She nods, and he cradles her head against his neck. Truth be told, he needs this more than she does.

_*_

Hannibal has spent the entire flight reading all the speculation that has been written about his engagement. Which was a very bad idea. The verdict – that they’re not going to last. That the

palace will make mincemeat of Hannibal and then proceed to feed him piece by piece to Bedelia's Corgis. That Will is using him for his money and access to starlets.

He is sick to his stomach by the time the plane lands in Toronto. Once the okay is given to turn back on his device, he ignores the message blinking from the palace. He makes a mental note to have Bella run interference with Brian and company, but Hannibal doesn't trust himself to speak to anyone connected to the Crown at the moment.

Hannibal checks for a text message from Jack, who is outside the gate and warns that a madhouse will be waiting for him. Airport security and the Canadian guard have been called in for crowd control.

Hannibal braces himself as his security detail moves through the airport in formation, placing Hannibal in the center. People stop and take photos. The tension is thick. They'd gotten word at how big the crowd is, with royal watchers trading barbs with the anti-gay protestors.

Hannibal's stomach lurches as he spies the packed area, spreading from the customs exit to baggage claim. He can't imagine how they're going to get through to the car.

As his passport gets stamped, he considers not leaving the airport. It would be easier to call the meeting here and then just get on a plane back to Denmark.

And then someone in the crowd spots him.

"Hannibal!" the shouts are relentless. "Hannibal, over here!" "How did you catch a King, Hannibal?" "Has the House of Graham signed off on the engagement?" "Is it over already?" "Hannibal, will your fans abandon you now?"

He has been hounded before. But he is blinded by the flashes and he has on his sunglasses. It all feels so surreal. It's like a tunnel he's found he's trapped in and the walls surrounding him are people screaming and reaching for him. He reminds himself that he has endured some tiny measure of this when he arrived at Cannes. But this is different. Much, much larger than the handful of photographers who usually follow him. Frightening, even.

His detail has been given orders to get him to this meeting. He can see Jack ahead, gesturing. They are not going to let him go back.

A thin pathway has been made. He crouches next to Jack. He can feel the crowd surging and the crush of bodies. The bodyguards, the police, the airport guards have huddled around and literally grabbed onto his shirttails. He can't breathe.

Panicked, he turns to Jack, "Get us out of here."

But it takes a half hour to get to the door. Another fifteen minutes to reach the awaiting black SUV. Bella opens the backseat door for them. Hannibal practically flings himself inside, breathless and stunned. One of the bodyguards stuffs himself beside him. Another goes in the front. Jack is the last one in. No one says anything for a long moment.

Despite being in the safety of the SUV, the driver can't even move as the photographers have surrounded them. If he drove off, they'd run over several people. The SUV rocks by the press of the bodies against it.

"Don't run over anyone's foot," Hannibal shouts to the front. "It's not worth anyone getting hurt. Let's just be patient."

The bodyguard in the front radios the rest of the team, pushing for safety over speed. Hannibal sinks back in his seat, stressed.

Jack exchanges a look with Bella. He needs some help with Hannibal. Bella squeezes Hannibal's hand. "Hannibal," she calls out to him. He's curled up against the window, slack-jawed. She waits for him to focus on her. "This too will pass."

Fear has gripped him and it's not dissipating. He is tense. He can only see it getting worse.

Outside, the rest of the detail is wrestling with the paparazzi to flank the car. They finally get enough momentum started in directing traffic, and slowly, carefully, they inch away from the airport.

_*_

Abigail's plane has landed. It's a private jet that Hannibal had booked for her. Will emerges from his civilian car, an Audi, watching her take the stairs. They rush towards each other when her feet touch the ground and Will embraces her, practically lifting her off her feet.

"Hey, there," she smiles.

"Hey, there, yourself," he smiles back. "There's a palace of yours you should see, Princess."

She blushes. "My mother calls me that."

"Your mother's right. Where is she"?

Will peers up on the plane.

"It's just me. Hannibal convinced her you're not a serial killer and I'll be in good hands."

All Will can do is blink, his mouth slightly ajar. "Well, let me show you around."

_*_

By the time Hannibal has arrived in Toronto, the detail has scrambled to find a way to avoid pulling up to the hotel where the meeting is taking place. The paparazzi are tracking the SUV and they have gone around the block twice.

Much to his surprise, Hannibal's phone rings. He practically jumps out of his skin. It's Brian. He decides he better answer this time.

"Hannibal, are you alright?" Brian starts.

"Did Will pick up Abigail or not?" Hannibal's on high alert.

"Yes, yes, that's actually going well. Hannibal, Queen Mother asked me to call."

"Bedelia?"

"Have you seen the photos of you going through customs?"

"No."

"There's a problem, Hannibal, with your pants."

"I was mobbed and she's worried about my pants?"

"She was under the assumption you were comfortable with this scene."

Hannibal takes a breath. He is not wearing his usual leather travel pants. His zipper is zipped. He pulls up the internet on his phone. The material of his cargo pants were strained enough that any viewer, meaning the world, could see the outline of his penis. It's yet another embarrassment to the palace and has brought back all of his nude pictures front and center. Hannibal cringes, on the verge of tears.

"Fuck."

Brian sighs.

"Hannibal, you have to change your pants if you go out in public again. Her Majesty expects you to present yourself in a way that's respectful of the palace and the King, and currently you are our cultural ambassador – "

"Brian," Hannibal grits out. "I understand."

Jack's eyes widen as Hannibal rifles through his carry-on bag. "I can't believe this," he keeps repeating.

Jack and Bella step out of the SUV when it parks in the hotel garage so Hannibal can change.

Hannibal has stayed at The Sofitel on numerous occasions. He personally knows the HR manager who has always ordered the hotel staff to respect his privacy or face immediate termination. But he knows it would be too enticing for the staff to sneak a picture to the tabloids for a sweet fee.

He climbs out of the SUV in a suit, bracing himself for the next invasion. He is twitching like a leaf.

Jack's hands are sweaty as he guides Hannibal to a loading dock and onto a freight elevator. They are going to the top floor where Kade and her studio minions await in a conference room with stunning views. But the elevator stops midway there.

Hannibal shrinks back into the corner and turns his face away. Bella, Jack and the detail casually drift to step in front of him. The cage is tense until the woman steps off.

“We didn’t even get a chance to talk, Hannibal,” Jack laments. "What have you decided?"

“I haven't. Completely. I need a moment with Tobias first,” Hannibal demands. He hands over his phone for Bella to monitor. He'd rather her keep it than have the studio take it.

“I’ll pull Tobias out,” Bella states, stepping out of the elevator.

For a moment, Jack and Hannibal are alone in the elevator. Hannibal turns to him. “I’m freaking out.”

“This is only the beginning, Hannibal.”

“I know," he inhales. "Talk to me about my portfolio. Do I have enough to retire?”

“You’re worth about one hundred million. If you sell all the properties, then obviously more. You’re set for life, if we keep you on a budget. Your residuals will also maintain a steady cash flow for a few years. All of the fashion houses have called. They want to dress you for the wedding, for the ceremonies, you won’t have to pay much to keep up with Will's lifestyle.”

Hannibal exhales. “And what about walking off this film? How much will they penalize me?”

“You’ll be blacklisted. You’ll have to pay back everything they spent on you here. Don’t worry about that. Think about what you want and let me know. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Hannibal hugs him gratefully.

“I have one more favor to ask of you, my friend,” Hannibal starts. “Would you consider walking me down the aisle?”

Jack is shocked and honored, but recovers quickly. Just as he’s about to speak, Tobias walks up.

“We’ll talk,” Hannibal steps away, smoothly. Jack nods and heads off to the conference room.

If Hannibal were to sum up how Tobias looks, he would say hurt. His film is on the verge of falling apart. His ex-boyfriend is the talk of the tabloids with another man. Tobias shirks from Hannibal’s closeness.

They move over to the windows, away from the elevator where his security detail remains behind, guarding the entrance. Hannibal's eyes linger over the cityscape before him. Everything looks manageable from where he stands. Easy.

"Tell me you're not walking off my film, Hannibal," Tobias says gently.

Hannibal grimaces and runs his hand through his hair.

"Eighty million dollars on the line. Hundreds of jobs."

Hannibal nods. "I'm replaceable."

"You're not. It's not easy to find a leading man. You're in a class of your own and you know it. Do this one last thing for me, Hannibal."

"I understand this has tremendous business consequences..."

"And your fiancé is a personal issue – "

"The Royal Family of Denmark is also a business. I will be expected to make royal appearances every single day," Hannibal looks daunted by this. "I can't do both. I can't be in two places at once. Being at Will's side is my job now."

Tobias looks away. Hannibal takes in his profile. He reaches out and wraps his arms around him.

"I never wanted to hurt you," Hannibal insists. "I don't know what to do. I see you and think I'm making a mistake – "

"Do you love him more than you love this business?" Tobias asks, despite Hannibal's closeness. He's tempted to stroke Hannibal's hair, to comfort him the way he likes. "Because, Hannibal, I know you, and I know you love being in the movies. Can you really walk away from it all?"

Hannibal's face contorts in pain. He chokes back a sob, trying to squeeze back the stress and the tears threatening to flow. Tobias catches a glimpse of the engagement ring that every photographer has been ordered to get a clear shot of. It is not something one can miss. Hannibal catches him staring. And they both know if Tobias had given Hannibal a ring, he would've asked Hannibal not to wear it in public. The movie business came before their relationship.

"Do what's right for you. Put yourself first, for once." Tobias can't resist stroking Hannibal's face before he walks away. "You've had a good run, Hannibal. It's okay. I'll tell Kade it's okay."

_*_

Hannibal splashes his face with water in the bathroom and then stares at his reflection in the mirror. His racing pulse has settled down and it feels like his panic attack has passed.

He slips on his very charming, sincere mask for the meeting and opens the doors into the grand conference room.

_*_

Will and Abigail finish up dinner and decide to take a walk to Bedelia's private quarters for dessert. They walk in a comfortable silence, with Abigail stealing sidelong glances at him.

"I can't wait to meet Hannibal," Abigail sing-songs. "Did you fall in love seeing him in his movies?"

"That's a persona, that public face he has. He's a little different when you meet him."

"Yeah, how would you describe him?"

Will thinks about her question. "He's very sweet, but the minute something threatens what he loves, boom. Suddenly, there's a lion in the room."

Bedelia stands by her apartment door, holding one of the Corgis, which Abigail oohs and aahs over. Despite the warmth of the dogs and the call of the dessert, even Abigail picks up on the chill in Bedelia's judgment of her. Will catches it too.

"She likes you," Bedelia tells her, giving her a rare smile. It takes Abigail a second to realize Bedelia's referring to her dog. "Come in and let your father give us a proper introduction."

Abigail shudders under Bedelia's assessing eye, and waits for Will to step inside. But Will is still standing in the hall and is slowly shaking his head.

"You know what, Mother," Will starts. "It's been a long day. We'll take a raincheck on dessert. Maybe come back another time."

Will wraps an arm around Abigail's shoulders and guides her away from Bedelia's apartment. He looks ahead as Abigail looks curiously up at him.

"You don't want me to get to know Grandmother?" Abigail asks, confused.

"It would be best if Hannibal were here, as a buffer. She's not, um, how do you say…" Will searches for the right phrase in English. "The best role model for you. Hannibal will be back soon."

He walks her back to Hannibal's apartment, where he's determined they will all stay. Will's own apartment reminds him too much of his past. Too much of Beverly and Alana. Will has some ice cream brought over and they stay up talking through the night.

_*_

Kade Purnell is not bowled over by Hannibal's charm and refuses to accept Tobias' opinion on where Hannibal is on the situation. She has been given a directive to not let Hannibal nor his team of agents and managers out of the room until she gets his word that he will finish the film. Every person on his team has been assigned at least 3 studio executives to influence the movie star.

She closes the conference doors, holding over 30 people inside hostage, until this is resolved in her favor.

Despite the siege mentality, Kade and the studio want to appeal to Hannibal's senses. There are trays of food out, plenty of cocktails flowing, giving a false sense of celebration, but underneath, the desperation is obvious to all involved. A King has laid claim to their movie star's heart. And they can't calculate if Hannibal's image has been damaged or if he is an even hotter commodity as a result.

Kade has placed bets that the public will pay to see Hannibal in any movie at this point. She has been approved to offer him anything he wants to stay attached to the project.

In a perfect world, Hannibal would like to do both. Have his King and his movie too. Kade pounces on the ambivalence and signals for the editor to play the partial cut of what has been shot to appeal to the artist in Hannibal. The film is gorgeous. Hannibal looks gorgeous. At the end of the reel, everyone applauds and looks to Hannibal.

"See? It's gold, Hannibal. Your charisma is what makes it that way. And we only need a few more months to finish the rest," Kade raises her voice after the lights come up. "Tobias, as you know, has put five years of his life into this getting this story told. We waited for your schedule to open up because you are absolutely the only actor we had in mind for the Prince. Apparently, we weren't the only ones who thought you were destined for royalty."

The studio executives laugh at her joke. Hannibal forces himself to smile. Everyone can sense that the guilt trip isn't working. Kade changes tact.

"How can we make this work, Hannibal, so you can work on the rest of the film? Is it a matter of us taking the rough cut to King Will so he can see for himself?"

Jack has to admire her tenacity. She absolutely refuses to take no for an answer. Bella leans in and shows Jack and Hannibal a piece of paper, telling them the emergency order was approved. The Crown attorneys had argued the custody case for Axel Boyle in Nova Scotia this morning. Paternity tests confirmed that Will is indeed Axel's father and the grandparents agreed to release the child to Hannibal on the condition that they spend a few weeks in Denmark to observe and transition the child.

Hannibal is pleased and anxious to leave. Jack nods and rises.

“I think it’s time for us to consult with our client,” Jack speaks on behalf of the team. “Let’s see where he stands so we can let him go – “

“Go?” Kade shrieks.

“I have to handle an urgent matter for the King,” Hannibal mentions. He walks around to each member of his team and hugs them. This is goodbye. He doesn't know when he decided, but Jack seemed to understand he didn't have a choice. "I'll see you at the wedding rehearsal," Jack tells him. "If not earlier, to go through your houses." Hannibal nods, grateful. He reaches Tobias and gives him a quick kiss on the corner of his mouth.

“I’m sorry,” Hannibal says. “I’ll miss you.”

“You know where to find me if it doesn’t work out,” Tobias pokes.

Hannibal shoots him a look and points a finger at him to behave. He moves onto face the music with Kade.

“Hannibal,” she starts and then gives up, “we’re here if you change your mind. We love you.”

“My hope,” Hannibal pleads, “is that everyone understands how unusual this is. That it was never my intention to leave you in the lurch like this. Every person in this room has been instrumental in supporting my career. It pains me not to finish this film.“

He kisses her on both cheeks and is led out by his security team. He’s told in the elevator that the employee entrance has been staked out and that it’s safer to go out the front. Hotel security has locked the lobby and set up guardrails, ready for them.

They move swiftly through the lobby and then Hannibal feels the heat of the sun and the camera flashes, hoping he made the right decision. That leaving the film industry behind is not something he will regret and end up resenting Will.

_*_

The Boyles are delighted that the absolutely adorable Axel takes so quickly to Hannibal. The baby sleeps cradled on his chest and Hannibal relaxes in the rocking chair and takes a nap himself. He dreams of his uncle, his aunt and his sister surrounding him at a table, accusing him of making the wrong decision to kill them the way he did. That soon, the truth will come out. Hannibal awakens, gasping. He hadn't thought of his family in a long time. And now, just as he's building a new one...

He accepts a soothing tea from the Boyles and conveys to his detail that he's anxious to leave. But the Boyles have one more thing to show Hannibal. They pull out an album of modeling photos and clippings of their daughter, Cassie, and share that her recovery has taken longer because of her eating disorder. Cassie gave her blessing to have Axel reunite with Will.

The sweet old couple has finished packing and they quietly follow Hannibal onto the private jet he rented. He refuses to have them swarmed and dragged into the spotlight at the airport, nor endanger the baby's safety.

The jet touches down in Copenhagen and taxies to a private hanger. Axel has been fussy towards the end of the journey, picking up on Hannibal's unsettled disposition. Once they had boarded the plane, Hannibal had realized that he hadn't heard from Will his entire journey. No update about how he was getting along with Abigail… nothing.

Hannibal approaches the Audi, and sees only a driver. Hannibal hides his disappointment as he latches Axel into his car seat. Even the Boyles shoot him a sympathetic look.

As the car approaches the palace, Hannibal makes a point of checking his resentment. He knows he's mourning his career and doubting the May-December aspects of their hyperspeed relationship. He doesn't want to pull an Axel and stomp his feet because he's giving up his privacy and all his possessions. No, he will not lash out at his fiancé.

Will and Abigail are waiting for them when the car pulls up. And something about the tilt of Abigail's head, the way she's looking at Axel, puts Hannibal on edge. He sees more Bedelia in her than Will.

He meets her challenging gaze with his own.

"Abigail," Hannibal breaks the ice, "I'm so glad you're here."

"It was my fault we didn't make it to the airport," Abigail takes full credit. "We were Face-timing with my mom and I told her I wanted to stay with you guys."

"Isn't that great?" Will smiles. Hannibal answers with a smile of his own. Abigail watches them like a referee. Will is in thrall of the baby as the Boyles stand wide-eyed at the opulence around them.

Hannibal places Axel front and center. "Meet Axel, the latest addition to the Graham household. Axel, this is your sister, Abigail. And your father, Will."

"You're like the spawn collector," she jokes to Hannibal.

"Abil," Axel sputters out, his eyes practically crossing at the effort.

The baby squirms in his arms and reaches for Abigail's hair. She holds Axel in the air, who squeals, delighted. Will reaches for his son and the two have a soul-connecting moment as they stare at each other.

"I think he knows who you are," Grandma Boyle observes. Will gives a chuckle, but he's overwhelmed.

"We have set up an apartment for you," Will remembers his guests. "I know it's been a long journey."

Abigail leaps ahead, giving the Boyles a tour as Hannibal grabs the diaper bag and stroller. He smoothes his suit jacket, just in case he runs into Bedelia. Maybe he's being oversensitive, but he has taken the missive to be at his best-dressed at all times to heart. When he straightens up, Will is right there.

"Hey," Will says.

"Hey," Hannibal says.

Will starts to pick up on Hannibal's edginess, but Axel takes that exact moment to want to be put down. He barrels ahead, squealing at the top of his lungs. It's enough to stop his grandparents and Abigail in their tracks and they wait for him to catch up.

Will follows behind him, attentive and enchanted by his children interacting in front of him. Hannibal drifts behind, his mind elsewhere.

_*_

Bedelia extends an invitation that cannot be refused – dinner to meet the entire family. She spends exactly three minutes holding the baby before letting him down to go and chase after the Corgis. Hannibal sees that this is the exact moment when Abigail crowns Bedelia as a goddess in her eyes.

It's sobering for Will to see how Bedelia's affection and preference for Abigail plays out over Axel. He is pensive most of the dinner, picking at his food and listening to them interact.

"You must learn the language, Abigail," Bedelia commands. "We'll bring in a tutor for you to start tomorrow."

Hannibal is being a mother-hen with Axel and the dogs, concerned how the animals will react to the child near their size.

"Hannibal and Axel should join them," Will interjects.

Bedelia and Abigail pause. "Of course," Bedelia responds evenly. "But Abigail will be Queen one day and…"

"Don't make this a competition with my family," Will exhales. "I have every intention of taking Abigail to work with me. But I won't have her treated differently."

An uncomfortable silence fills the room. The Boyles glance around the table uneasily.

"Well," Abigail fills the silence, "you're never too old or too young to learn a new language."

Hannibal takes in the dig and smirks as he approaches the table with Axel. "Did I do something to you, Abigail?"

Caught, her eyes widen as she looks innocently at him. Will looks between them, surprised.

“If I’ve done something wrong, you’ll tell me, right?”

“Hannibal,” Abigail trails off, unable to form a comeback.

He turns his focus on Bedelia, letting his bitchiness show. “You should baby-proof your apartment, Bedelia, if you'd like to consider watching Axel for us. Or if you want us to take the family photo in these rooms.”

Bedelia sits with that bitchiness for a moment. And whips up a bit of her own. “Actually, I was thinking we should have it outside. Tomorrow. Give it a natural backdrop. The weather should be nice.”

Will appraises them and tries to keep the mirth off his face. He can’t help but love when Hannibal goes into protective mode. And he knew he could count on Hannibal to keep Bedelia’s influence on their daughter in check.

“I’m curious, Bedelia,” Hannibal takes a sip of wine, “what you plan on saying when the press asks what you think of this family?”

Bedelia doesn’t hesitate. “Will has always done things his way, in his own timeframe. I’ve learned not to question it.”

Will rolls his eyes. Even Mr. Boyle snorts with laughter.

“We may have to work on that quote,” Hannibal sneers, casting a pointed look at Abigail, who gets the message.

_*_

“Come in.”

Hannibal peeks in to Abigail’s room. “Wanted to say goodnight and to let you know it’s confirmed. We’re set to be introduced to the public tomorrow.”

“Yeah?”

Hannibal crosses and sits on the edge of her bed. She closes her computer and gives him her full attention. She takes a shuddering breath.

“Well, this is really happening.”

“If you don’t want your face splashed across People magazine and other places we won’t mention, I get it. There’s a dark side to fame, Abigail, and I can’t imagine what it will be like

with the social media component. Do you want to maintain your privacy? Because we can make that happen."

“I want everyone to know Will’s my dad,” Abigail whispers. Hannibal nods and starts to go. And then: “What about Axel? Did his mom sign off on him being introduced to the public?”

“She did. She’ll come to Copenhagen when she feels better. Do you want your mom to be here?”

Hannibal braces himself. There’s a picture of Dolores Hobbs on Abigail’s nightstand. She’s still a very beautiful woman. Hannibal pulls his eyes away and tries to not let his mind wander to very jealous places.

Abigail holds this one last card over Hannibal. “There’s a part of me that wants her here. Wants her to be in your place.”

They hold the look between them.

“She gave up a lot to raise me.”

“But she didn’t struggle, Abigail. She was taken care of.”

“Financially, sure. That's not what I meant. She didn’t have him. Like you do. She didn’t have his love. And I think she would’ve given up everything to have that instead of what the palace gave her in return. I was raised by a bitter, single mother. And I know that’s not your fault.”

“You will get the acknowledgement that she didn’t. It’s only natural that you’d want it for her, too. But I can't change that the palace held Will back from knowing his daughter. And you have to keep in mind that as soon as we were told, we reached out to you.“

Abigail considers this. Considers him.

“I know the only reason I’m here is because of you. You’re his heart, Hannibal.”

She throws her arms around his neck. “Thank you. I promise I won’t disappoint you. Or Will.”

“Do me a favor and call him your father. Not everyone gets that chance, you know.”

That gets a smile out of her. She pulls the duvet up around her. Ready to dream.

“Goodnight, Hannibal.”

“Goodnight, Abigail.”

Hannibal closes the door behind him and peeks into the remaining spare room. Axel’s things fill the room, but his bassinet is set up in Hannibal’s bedroom. The Boyles are staying down the hall in their own apartment, relieved to have an evening to themselves but nearby if needed.

Will is hanging out with Axel in the living room, having no luck getting him to bed. He stretches out his arm and links his hand in Hannibal's.

"I'll stay up with him. Get some sleep," Will pulls him down for a kiss.

Hannibal nods and pulls away. He gives Axel a kiss on top of his head and heads into the bedroom.

"Hannibal," Will calls. "Having second thoughts?"

"Why would you say that?"

"You seem different. Since you came back. What happened?"

Hannibal considers lying to him. He stops himself. "I thought I knew what being a celebrity meant. But your kind of celebrity is on a completely different stratosphere. I had no idea it could leach into every facet of our lives. And I'm frightened about bringing the kids into this. About being able to handle it. I'm afraid how going public will change us."

"It won't break us though, if we don't let it."

Hannibal turns from the door and looks over his shoulder at Will. Will has Axel balanced on his hip and crosses to him.

"I promised you," Will reminds him, "that you wouldn't endure the scrutiny by yourself. I'm right here, Hannibal."

Hannibal touches his face and their noses bump and dance against each other. Will teases a set of kisses along Hannibal's neck. Hannibal's eyes roll back in his head before he closes them and tries to catch his breath. He has to grip himself before he comes in his pants like a teenager. "You don't know what you do to me, Will Graham," Hannibal smiles. He puts some space between them. Loosens his fingers from Will's shirt and steps back.

"I should get my beauty sleep, considering the microscope we'll be under tomorrow," Hannibal declares.

Will gives him his space, loosening his grip on Hannibal's back and balancing the baby on the other.

Hannibal closes the door.

_*_

Abigail is delighted by the wardrobe and jewelry that are wheeled in for her to select for the photo shoot. Even Axel gets his own cart. Bedelia ultimately approves the picks for the kids.

Hannibal gets his hair styled, little wings on his tips, as he will be getting the most scrutiny. He spends an exorbitant amount of time in the makeup chair, too, much to Abigail's delight.

They opt for the casual look. A simple white dress shirt for Hannibal and gray slacks. Will in a blue suit. Axel wears a cute custard ensemble that barely contains all his baby fat. And Abigail is in a butterfly blouse with a bright green skirt. She wears a charm bracelet and earrings designed with crown jewels.

The family portrait is taken first. Hannibal and Will lounge on the grass, watching Axel chase after the dogs and Abigail sits on Will's right.

Will selects the one where Axel has a wide grin on his face, his hands clasped in delight. Abigail has her hand on Will's shoulder, squarely looking into the camera, as does Will. And Hannibal looks off in the distance, an ambivalent aura about him. His left hand covers his right, his thumb grazing his engagement ring.

The picture has a mood to it. Not picture perfect. But real.

Many will try to reconstruct Hannibal's thinking in the photos. Is he happy? Miserable? Is it determination? Nervousness? Or concern?

It is their first family photo and it is released to the world when Will steps forward to a bank of microphones in front of the palace to make the official announcement of his engagement to Hannibal and being united with his children. It is an utter frenzy as the reporters and photographers clamor around them. Hannibal tries to keep a neutral but calm face as the flashes pop for a full five minutes. They can't get enough.

Hannibal stands silently behind Will with Abigail playing big sister to Axel. Bedelia had told Abigail no matter what to stand up straight and pretend she was at the circus. And she is carrying herself with humor and confidence and poise. The media on hand love her. The baby is a handful though, and at one point, reaches out for Will, who breaks his speech to take him.

"Hannibal, anything you'd like to add?" Freddie Lounds asks.

Will nods. Hannibal has told him how he much he owes Freddie in terms of access. He steps up to the mic, and gives a few standard phrases in Danish, which he hopes he said properly. Will takes his hand and translates it.

"The Danish people are very special to me as they've all made me feel so welcomed here," Will translates.

Axel settles down and Hannibal continues in English.

"I'd like to just add how proud I am to become the first Prince Consort to a King. It is such a wonderful time and this is such a wonderful place to raise our family."

He smiles at Will and steps back, looking at Freddie demurely. Brian steps forward to end the press conference and Will walks back into the palace holding Abigail's hand, who is so

thrilled to have made her debut this way. Her head rests on his shoulder and she is beaming at him.

Hannibal scoops up Axel, who wants to linger, watching the palace courtyard light up with a thousand lights.

“What do you see, little one?” Hannibal whispers to him. “Are those stars you see?”

Axel babbles to him and Hannibal brings him close.

It is this video that Freddie publishes alongside the official photo. Hannibal, wearied already by the weight of his royal duties, Axel waving, before he runs and lunges and trips behind Will and Abigail, as they head into the life that awaits them.

Her headline will create an uproar with a quote from her palace source, giving an insider’s take on Will and Hannibal’s relationship: “Can’t live with him, can’t live without him”. This did not come from the "Travis" account. She adds a countdown ticker to the wedding with her readers betting 2-to-1 that the “royal gay husbands” will make it last forever.

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